

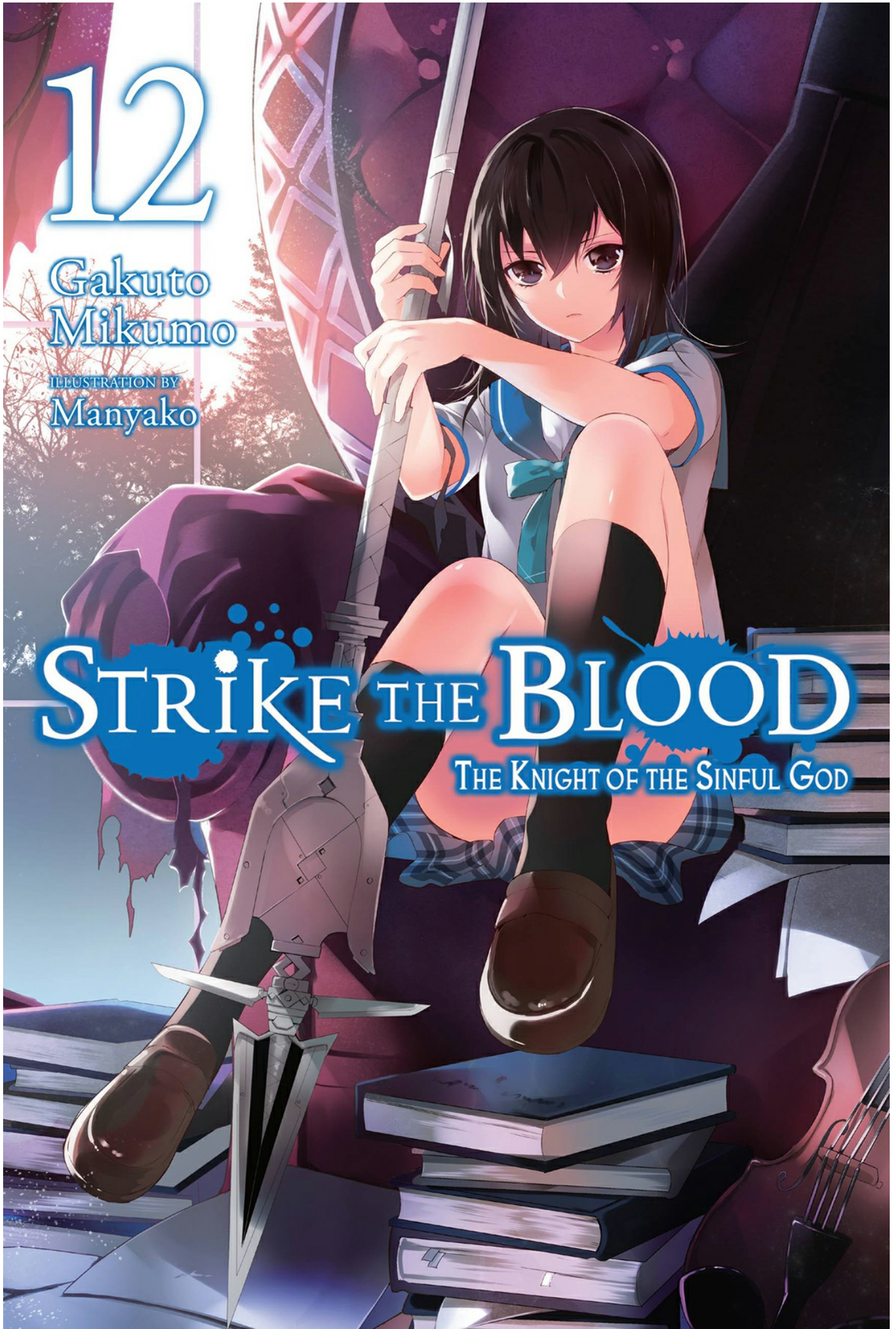
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Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE KNIGHT OF THE SINFUL GOD



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12 STRIKE THE BLOOD

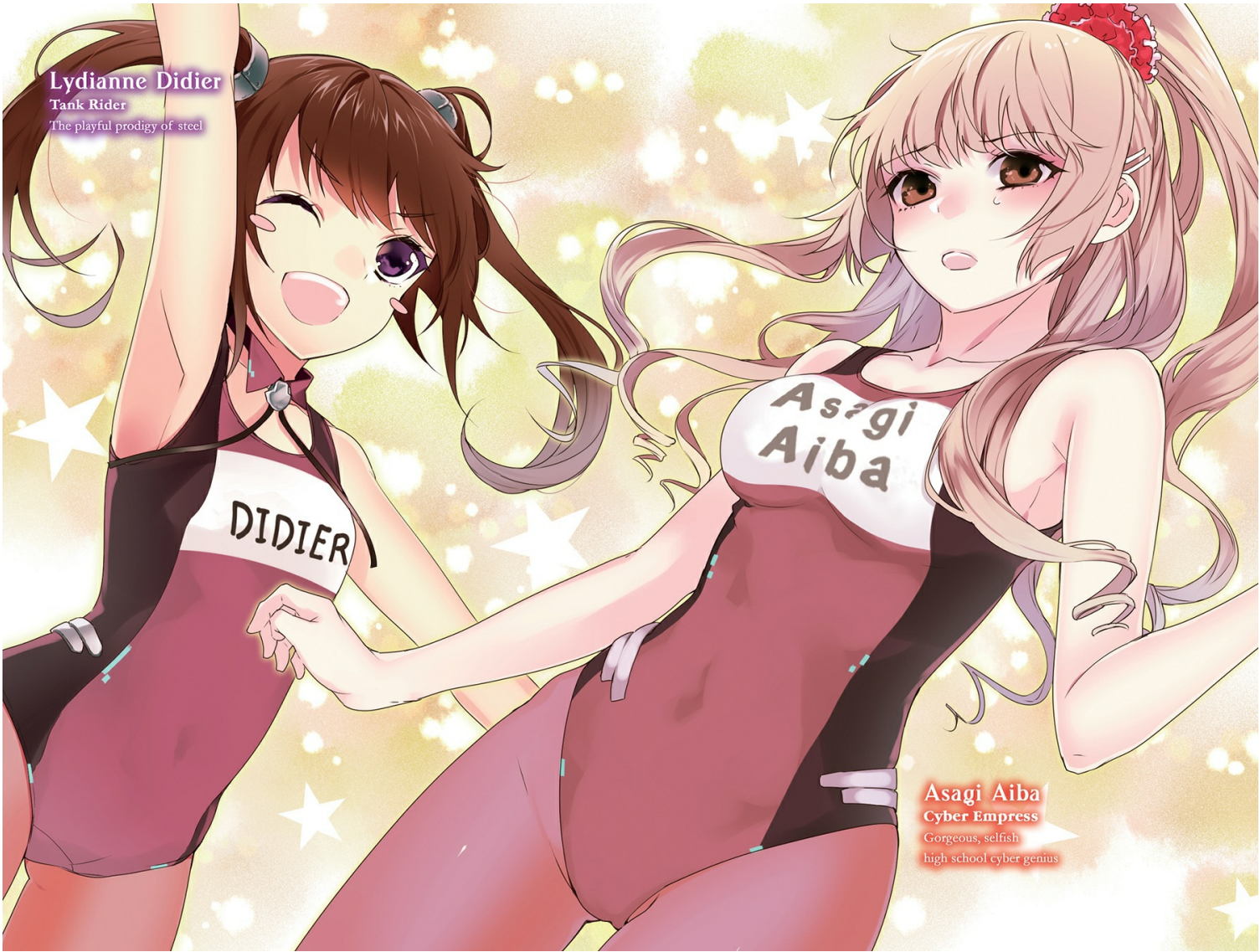
THE KNIGHT OF THE SINFUL GOD

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Yuri Haba
Another Sword Shaman
Pristine maiden of
the silver sword

Shio Hikawa
Another Shamanic War Dancer
Steady of mind, pure of heart
Princess of the demon-purging bow



Lydianne Didier

Tank Rider

The playful prodigy of steel

Asagi Aiba

Cyber Empress

Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer



Contents

Intro	
Chapter One	On the Frozen Lake
	Intermission i
Chapter Two	Battlefield of White Mist
	Intermission ii
Chapter Three	The Knight of the Sinful God
	Intermission iii
Chapter Four	The Primogenitor and the Dragon
	Intermission iv
Chapter Five	Return from the Farthest Reaches
Outro	
Afterword	

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE KNIGHT OF THE SINFUL GOD

12

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 12

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Intro](#)

[Chapter One: On the Frozen Lake](#)

[Intermission i](#)

[Chapter Two: Battlefield of White Mist](#)

[Intermission ii](#)

[Chapter Three: The Knight of the Sinful God](#)

[Intermission iii](#)

[Chapter Four: The Primogenitor and the Dragon](#)

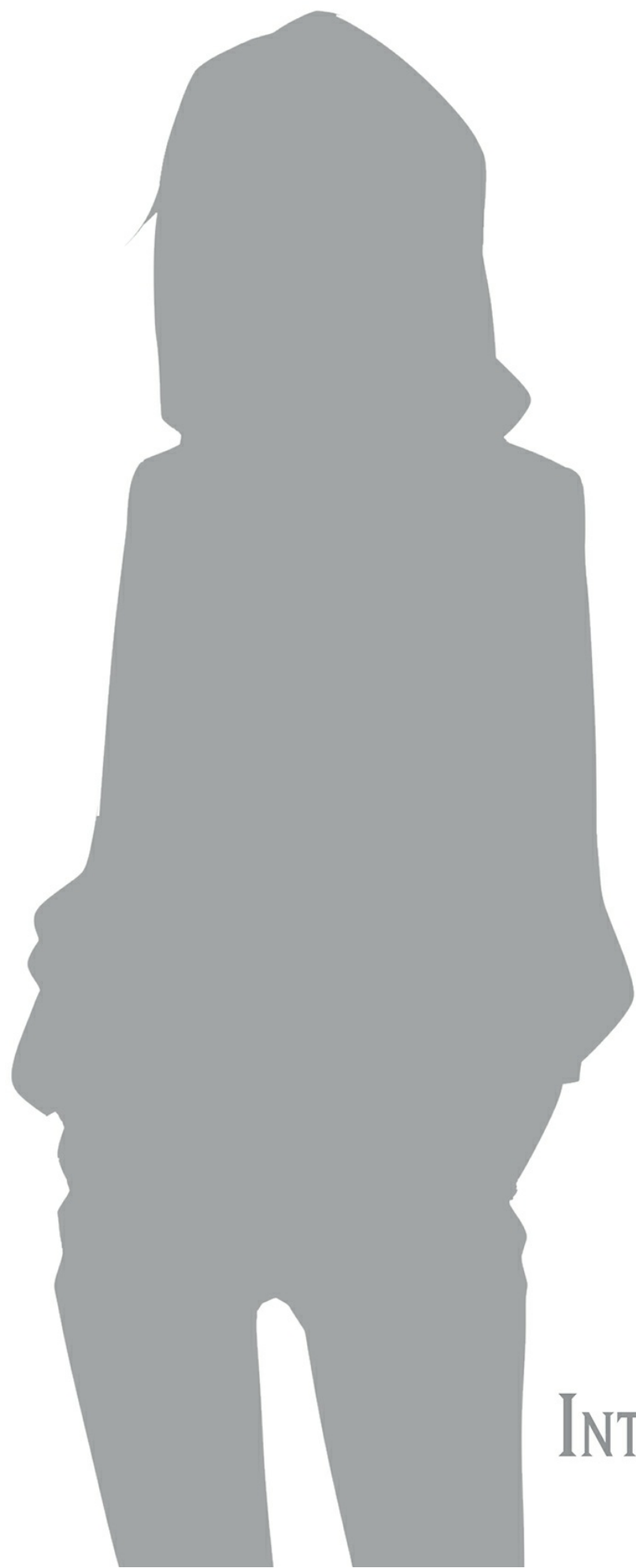
[Intermission iv](#)

[Chapter Five: Return from the Farthest Reaches](#)

[Outro](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



INTRO

INTRO

The full-metal silver spear gleamed in the light as it was thrust forward.

This was the Mechanical Demon-Purging Assault Spear Type Seven, also known as Snowdrift Wolf—a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency built for one purpose: slaying demons.

The spirit spear, able to nullify magical energy and rend any barrier, inhibited demons' regenerative abilities, causing the fatal decomposition of their flesh. When impaled, even vampires, proud of their immortality, would meet their doom. The World's Mightiest Vampire was certainly no exception.

However, when Kojou Akatsuki faced the blade of Snowdrift Wolf, the Fourth Primogenitor...laughed.

The instant the silver spear ran him through, he displayed a ferocious smile, his fangs bared—

The ferocious shock wave shook the ground, ripping through the air with a great roar.

A section of the artificial isle's coastline was erased, seemingly gouged right out.

The steel framework was shattered into fine fragments. The annihilating wave turned the resin back into the dust from whence it came.

For a brief moment, a giant water maid with a transparent body floated amid the onrushing waves. This was Undine, its upper half that of a beautiful woman, its lower that of a serpent—a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Urk...!”

The young woman in priestess attire bit her lip as she landed on the tip of a breakwater that had been ripped to shreds.

Her body was unharmed. Only the sleeves of her priestess attire and the hem of her *hakama*'s red skirt were torn—only slightly. She had escaped from ground zero an instant before the Beast Vassal's attack could engulf her.

However, as a result, she had lost the silver spear that should have been in her hands.

She had been forced to let go of the spear to escape from the Fourth Primogenitor's counterattack.

"Kojou...Akatsuki...!"

A thin, veil-like fabric had still covered her face when she unwittingly uttered his name.

The giant maid of water had vanished, already released from its summons. All that remained was the massive scar carved into the artificial ground, almost like something had bitten it away.

In an instant, the chaotic assault from the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassal had no doubt obliterated Itogami Island's beach down to the atomic level. Had her escape been even a second slower, she would have doubtlessly shared the same fate.

In an instant, Kojou Akatsuki had turned that desperate, hopeless situation around, backing her into a corner in turn.

And to do it, he had used his immortal flesh, launching a counterattack by which he himself would be destroyed—

"It seems you were whipped in rather spectacular fashion, Shizuka. The Gigafloat Management Corporation people must be clutching their heads right about now."

The woman stood still as she abruptly heard someone's voice at her feet. The tone was laid-back, lacking any urgency whatsoever.

The voice came from a lone feline—a beautiful, black panther with a supple physique. It wore a collar with a large chrysoberyl stone embedded in it. Its golden eyes seemed to glow; they clearly held a glint of intellect.

"...You were watching, Yukari Endou?" The woman in the priestess attire

spoke as she looked down at the talking panther.

She was addressing Endou, which was the name of the woman controlling the panther. The extraordinary *shikigami* user was controlling the familiar from the Japanese mainland, over three hundred kilometers away.

“To think Koyomi Shizuka, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, would rush out in this manner. The Fourth Primogenitor lad did quite well, too...”

The talking panther replied with a tone of voice that sounded somewhat impressed. That Kojou Akatsuki had withstood Koyomi’s attack had surely surprised the *shikigami* user as well.

The Lion King Agency’s current mission was to ensure that Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, was not permitted off the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island. By running him through with the spirit-purging spear, Kojou Akatsuki’s demonic energy would be nullified, and the Divine Oscillation Effect’s barrier would drive him into a comatose state. That was one way of using the Schneewaltzer. But—

“Did you underestimate the boy because he is a combat amateur, Paper Noise? If so, you’ve made quite the blunder.”

The black panther’s teasing question made Koyomi Shizuka shake her head slightly.

She was the only one who could employ Paper Noise, the phenomenon that *forcibly inserted time that did not exist* into the world.

This was neither stopping time nor moving at superhuman speeds. And yet, when Koyomi attacked during time that ought not to exist, all that remained were the effects of actions that should never have happened in the first place.

The ability to launch an attack that was 100 percent unpredictable was the reality behind Paper Noise. Even the great and powerful vampire primogenitors regarded this ability, belonging to the leader of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, with caution.

She did not believe Kojou Akatsuki had gleaned the true nature of Paper Noise the first time he had seen it. However, when he saw Koyomi raising

Snowdrift Wolf against him...he had smiled.

The Schneewaltzer's ability to nullify magical energy affected even Koyomi, its wielder. At the very least, she could not employ the power of Paper Noise while the Schneewaltzer was active.

Kojou Akatsuki had sacrificed his own right hand to bring Koyomi's spear to a halt. Then he commanded his own summoned Beast Vassal to attack in a way that would engulf him as well. Her ability to launch an uninhibited first strike did not mean she could nullify her opponent's attack. Aiming for a mutual exchange of blows was the most effective way to fend her off—indeed, the only way.

Kojou Akatsuki had understood that—not through calculation, but by intuition. That was why he had smiled.

To escape from his Beast Vassal, Koyomi had no choice but to let go of Snowdrift Wolf.

Kojou Akatsuki had sunk into the sea, still wounded, but the important takeaway was that Koyomi had been unable to stop him. And so, even if Kojou was the inheritor to the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency had allowed a mere high school student to slip through her fingers. She had no room to refute that it was indeed a blunder.

“That lad is a true wild card, the ‘powerless human’ who survived the Blazing Banquet to obtain the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. That fact is far more frightening than a primogenitor's demonic power or Beast Vassals... Not that he realizes it.”

The black panther's shoulders sank as it sighed in humanlike fashion.

From the tip of the demolished breakwater, Koyomi Shizuka gazed at the sea at her feet.

The surface of the sea was swirling in a ferocious vortex, a side effect of the shock wave unleashed by the Beast Vassal. The sea had to have swallowed up not just the gravely injured Kojou Akatsuki, but his observer, Yukina Himeragi, as well as Kiriha Kisaki of the Bureau of Astrology.

“...Then we were correct to entrust him to Yukina Himeragi. Method

notwithstanding, she has nonetheless somehow managed to bring that wild card under control.”

“I suppose she has... So what do you plan to do from here?”

“I shall recover Yukina Himeragi. We cannot afford to lose her now,” Koyomi said before removing her veil.

Setting the vampiric Kojou Akatsuki aside, she could not abandon Yukina and Kiriha. Those two girls had been exhausted from fighting a foe as fierce as Natsuki Minamiya; additional damage, enough to render them unable to move, had been inflicted by Koyomi herself. Koyomi bore a duty to rescue the pair before they drowned.

However, when Koyomi moved to unleash a *shikigami* toward the sea to search for them, the black panther stopped her.

“...It would seem search and rescue is unnecessary, Shizuka.”

The panther’s golden eyes were glaring at the opposite edge of the broken breakwater.

A tall, slender man was standing on the tip of an exposed steel girder.

He was an elegant, handsome, foreign young man wearing a refined white suit. The corners of his lips formed a smile as Koyomi and the panther gazed at him. Naked bloodlust oozed from every pore of his body.

The young man’s kind eyes conveyed a chilling message: *Interfere with Kojou Akatsuki any further, and I will kill you both.*

The impression given off was not that of a simple threat—if anything, he was thrilled at the prospect of fighting Koyomi.

“Master of Serpents...”

Koyomi let out an anguished sigh as she looked back into the young man’s eyes.

If Kojou Akatsuki left Itogami Island, he would no doubt stir up chaos on the mainland. However, to the young, battle-maniac aristocrat, that would be an auspicious turn of events.

The young man meant to lead Kojou Akatsuki away from the island for the same reason Koyomi wanted to seal him within it. Furthermore, Koyomi had no means to prevent it... For in that time and place, it was not in her interests to *slay the handsome, young aristocrat where he stood*.

“...Endou. Contact External Affairs. There should still be one Shamanic War Dancer able to move immediately, yes?”

Koyomi posed the question to the black panther in a quiet tone. If they couldn't stop the young aristocrat from heading to the mainland, a certain number of countermeasures became necessary. As head of the Lion King Agency, she could not simply leave them to their own devices.

“If you mean my bumbling apprentice, she is under house arrest at High God Forest,” the black panther replied bluntly.

Koyomi nodded with visible relief. “Then please call her. Now.”

“As easily said as done. Now then, *which one* do you want her to monitor?”

“...Pardon?”

The panther's sudden question made Koyomi furrow her brow. Then, when she followed the panther's gaze, she looked up.

Her eyes widened in shock.

A solitary, armored airship was floating above Itogami Island.

The vessel dominated the ground below as it leisurely cut through the azure sky. The hard, metallic shell encasing the airship was colored a pale blue, almost like a glimmering glacier. The image of a Valkyrie carrying a great sword was engraved into its stabilizer fins—the emblem of Northern Europe's Kingdom of Aldegia.

“No... Why are they...?!”

Koyomi voiced a small mutter when she made out a small figure standing on the airship's deck.

She did not recognize the figure—a boy wearing a white turban. His entire body was adorned with lavish golden jewelry. The demonic energy rippling off his small body seemed inferior to that of the young aristocrat with her on the

surface—monsters of a level that had no hope of being contained by the Demon Sanctuary.

Separated by hundreds of meters, the boy and the young aristocrat glared at each other, but the armored airship paid them no mind as it flew over the ocean. The airship was headed north of Itogami Island...and toward the Japanese mainland.

And when Koyomi's gaze returned to the surface once more, the young aristocrat had vanished.

All traces of Kojou Akatsuki and the others swallowed by the depths had vanished as well. The young aristocrat had whisked them away.

"Good grief... Ugh..."

Left behind, all Koyomi could do in that place was grasp the cuffs of her priestess attire and quietly murmur.

Even if she bore the title of one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, she was still only eighteen. It was too much for her to remain serene in the face of great disaster that could only bring the world to its ruin.

"No more," lamented the girl, clutching her head, but the black panther pretended not to hear.

Thus was the siege broken.

The Fourth Primogenitor departed the Demon Sanctuary, leaving vestiges of destruction behind him.

But this was no more than the prologue of a new upheaval.

For even then, the true menace slept at the bottom of a lake on the mainland, far from Itogami Island.

The menace that could vanquish even the World's Mightiest Vampire had yet to awaken...



CHAPTER ONE
ON THE FROZEN LAKE

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE FROZEN LAKE

1

“—Achoo!”

It was a temple deep in the mountains with a commanding view of the dam-created body of water known as Kannawa Lake. The quiet temple grounds, hazy from the morning mist, seemed to shudder in response to the loud sneeze of a certain middle-aged man.

His name was Gajou Akatsuki.

His skin was sunbaked; his face, impetuous. His forelocks were disheveled, as if crudely cut with a knife, and the stubble on his chin drew the eye. Supposedly, he had a real job as an archeologist, but the air the man gave off was like a mafia man from ages past—or a private investigator behind the times.

“Ugh... So chilly. Damn, mornings on the mainland sure get cold.”

Gajou took a break from his push-ups and wiped down his glistening frame with a towel.

He was in an old storehouse built within the densely packed, sacred grove of the forest. The earthwork building was constructed as if to offer partial isolation from the main temple complex.

There was a tatami mat on the floor and decent amenities, but the windows were located high up, so he had little way to know what was going on outside. Naturally, the storehouse didn't come with a television, personal computer, or any other information device. A heavy iron gate had been installed at the building's entrance, secured with multiple, complex locks. In other words, it was

a cell.

On top of that, his ankles were bound by fetters with chains.

The bottom line was that Gajou had been locked away.

In the one week or so since arriving there at Kamioda Temple, Gajou had not set a single foot outside his cell. But in spite of all that, he remained perfectly composed.

He sat cross-legged on the tatami mat when he called out in a warm tone to the girl standing guard outside.

“Heeey, Yui. You got breakfast ready yet?”

“P-please do not address me in such a presumptuous manner!”

The girl’s face flushed red as she approached the storehouse, wearing what appeared to be a high school student uniform. Her height didn’t quite reach 170 centimeters. Her medium-bob hairstyle, with locks dangling to the sides complimented by a ribbon-style hairpin, made her seem refined.

The girl was carrying a long, silver, full-metal sword on her back. It would be difficult to dispute that the boorish close-combat weapon was unsuited to the stern high school girl.

When that girl, named Yui, looked at Gajou through the cell’s iron gate, she went “*Eep!*” —her breath catching as if something had frightened her.

“Wh-why are you naked?!”

“Ahh, this? Training. Just my daily routine.”

Gajou Akatsuki, his chest bare, had white steam surrounding his entire body.

“I’m no spring chicken, y’know. If I’m not consistent, I’ll have love handles in no time. It’s hard to get enough exercise when you’re stuck in a narrow space like this.”

“Th-that doesn’t mean you should exercise while looking like that...!”

Yui was covering her eyes during her frantic rebuttal. To her, raised in an all-female dormitory from a young age, it was probably her first experience seeing a man’s bare chest firsthand. On top of that, in contrast to Gajou’s own words,

his physique was on par with a Greek statue's, which was more than enough to intimidate Yuiri out of her wits.

However, Gajou paid no heed to Yuiri's emotional state, turning over on the tatami mat as he said, "Why don't you join me, Yuiri? I'd be grateful if you helped me with my stretches."

"S-stretches...?"

"Yes, yes. Come on, do something that feels good with the old man here."

Yui's face twitched as she recoiled from Gajou's suspicious invitation.

Of course, Yuiri herself appreciated the great importance of stretching. It made sense to do cooldown exercises after weight training, for instance, and she knew that there were stretches that could only be done with two people.

However, helping this man with stretching meant touching his body, and depending on the circumstances, their bodies might press up against each other, resulting not only in touching his physique, but her flesh being pressed against his. Wouldn't that be a step toward adulthood? She had never done it with a man before, but it wouldn't hurt, would it?

This was the steamy inner conflict Yuiri grappled with before something interrupted them.

"—Er, nuoahh?!"

Gajou Akatsuki was lying down when a metallic arrow *whooshed* right past his ear. A few centimeters' difference, and his left ear would have been torn off completely.

"Don't seduce Yuiri, you filthy beast!"

"Sh-Shio...?!"

Yui's face was pure shock as she turned to the person behind her.

A black-haired girl wielding a silver recurve bow now trained a hateful gaze on Gajou. Her height and build were almost identical to Yuiri's, but her short hair, long only on the sides, gave off the impression of a strong-willed girl.

She was wearing a uniform that was identical to Yuiri's. From beneath that

uniform's skirt, she nocked a new arrow, taking aim at Gajou once more.

However, when Gajou saw the food tray at Shio's feet, his eyes woke up as he said:

"Ohhh, food, food!"

"I-idiot! Put on some clothes!"

Seeing Gajou, still bare from the waist up, closing the distance, Shio nervously dropped her arrow.

Gajou rested upon the iron gate, twisting his body toward Shio as he said, "Incidentally, Li'l Shio—"

"Y-You are in no position to address me that way!"

"Shio, then. How long do you plan to keep me in a place like this? You're from a special government agency, right? It's not good to keep an upstanding citizen in unlawful confinement."

"It is not an issue. This is an emergency measure for the well-being of the public. And stop calling me by my given name...!"

"Emergency measure... Huh."

Gajou slanted his lips with a "Hmm" as he accepted the food tray from Shio. Resting atop it was pickled daikon with a rice-and-veggie mixture, plus beef with additional steamed vegetables. The menu was rather extravagant, but it was obvious at a glance that it was an amalgamation of foods from storage.

"Besides, Mr. Gajou's confinement is on Ms. Hisano's orders."

"I still cannot believe it, but are you truly her son?"

"*Tch*... That hag again."

Gajou clicked his tongue as he listened to Yui and Shio's explanation.

It was none other than Gajou's own biological mother, Hisano, who had ambushed and knocked out Gajou upon his arrival at Kamiyoda Temple one week prior and tossed him into that cell. In the time since, Hisano had not shown herself even once, so Gajou did not know a single thing about the circumstances. It was surely the worst treatment possible toward the son who'd

brought over her granddaughter for a homecoming.

“Still abusing her own son at a ripe old age... She won’t die in peace, that one. So what’s that old bat up to these days?”

“That is not something you need to know. For that matter, talk or eat—pick one!”

Shio’s eyes narrowed, glaring at Gajou for continuing his questions while stuffing food into his mouth.

However, once Gajou made quick work of the food, he said:

“Hmmm. So the Self-Defense Forces are on the move, huh? Finally.”

He said it in a nonchalant tone. Shio’s and Yuiri’s faces paled as they listened.

“If they’re operating with the Lion King Agency, it’d be Narashino’s Special Attack Mage Regiment or something along those lines. The commanding officer would be Three Saints class from the Lion King Agency... Then the target is Avalon, at the bottom of Kannawa Lake?”

“Gajou Akatsuki, how...do you know about...?!”

The food Shio had brought to him was not cooked at the temple, but rather, it came from a type of military ration. It was prearranged food made for simplified cooking—the sort supplied to the Self-Defense Forces.

The fact he was being assigned combat rations meant that those associated with the Lion King Agency, like Shio and Yuiri, no longer had the luxury of taking the time to cook. In other words, they had finally begun proceeding with their operation in earnest.

Gajou had correctly ascertained all this from nothing more than the change in the contents of his meal.

The Lion King Agency and the Self-Defense Forces were cooperating in a closely held secret project. Even Yuiri and Shio did not know the exact date or hour when the operation would begin. The girls were rocked by the fact that such crucial information had been unwittingly leaked to an outsider. Then:

“As shrewd as always, Gajou. I wonder just whom you take after...”

“Eeep...!”

“Ms. Hisano?!”

As Yuiri and Shio stood rooted to the spot, an old woman clad in an aikido-style martial arts outfit emerged from behind them.

Her slender frame made her appear taller than her actual height. Her long white hair was braided without fanfare down her back. The thick creases of her forehead were appropriate to her age, but her valiant poise retained many traces of the beauty of her youth.

Gajou looked up at the old woman, putting his chin in his palm with a sulky look.

“So you’ve finally come out, you decrepit old snake phantom.”

“Who are you calling a phantom? How rude.”

Hisano spoke in a manner that kept her irritation in check.

Yuri and Shio kept their breathing quiet as they watched the thorny, bizarre exchange between mother and son.

Hisano’s public position was the chief priest of Kamioda Temple, overseeing the priestesses within. Though this was a venerable and honored position in the priesthood, it did not make her Yuri and Shio’s direct commanding officer.

However, in the past, Hisano had cooperated in quelling numerous sorcerous disasters, and she had worked as an instructor in ritual magic for numerous organizations, the Lion King Agency included. Many of her pupils were serving as active Federal Attack Mages to that day. In other words, to Yuri and Shio, she was pretty much the master to *their* masters. Normally, they’d hesitate to even directly exchange words with her. They couldn’t help but be nervous in her presence.

“And Nagisa?” Gajou asked, glaring at Hisano.

Gajou hadn’t seen Nagisa Akatsuki, his own daughter, even once since being imprisoned in the cell. The only thing he’d heard through Yuri and Shio was that Nagisa had been in poor health.

“She is fine, of course. Her body will soon be fully healed.” Hisano’s

expression did not change.

“Is that so?” was all Gajou murmured as he gazed at his now empty tray of combat rations.

“...So you *did* bring Nagisa here, knowing of Avalon’s existence.”

Hisano turned a reproachful gaze toward her son. Gajou looked up, smiling defiantly at his mother.

“I’ll do anything to save her. Same as you, right?”

For one, silent moment, Hisano’s breath seemed to catch. Then, she exhaled.

“How much do you remember, Gajou?”

“Remember...? About what?” Gajou knit his brows.

Hisano coolly watched his reaction before piling on an additional question.

“About those siblings... Kojou and Nagisa.”

“Ugh...!”

Hisano’s tone was gentle, but Gajou’s reaction was dramatic nonetheless. The box of combat rations fell onto the tatami mat as he collapsed with a groan.

Gajou’s cheeks had lost all color. He let out an anguished moan between his clenched inner teeth. He was assailed by a ferocious headache, almost as if his brain was churning.

“So your memory has indeed been *consumed*. An aftereffect of the Blazing Banquet—the revival of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Hisano spoke to herself in a piteous tone.

Gajou Akatsuki had lost large portions of his memories of his own children. As he was now, he did not even comprehend the reason why. The fact that Kojou and Nagisa hadn’t noticed was due to Gajou’s meticulous preparations beforehand...and desperately keeping up the act.

“Why you... What do you know, hag?!” Gajou yelled at her, his emotions bared.

“Ms. Hisano...!”

“It’s dangerous! Any farther and...!”

Seeing Gajou burn with rage, Yuiri and Shio shouted at the same time. Hisano gave the pair a scolding look.

“Shio Hikawa, I entrust the continued surveillance of this man to you. Keep your eyes on him until the ceremony is complete. Yuiri Haba, come with me.”

“Y...yes.”

Cowed by Hisano’s coerciveness, Yuiri and Shio dutifully nodded. However, their eyes contained a fair bit of confusion.

Gajou’s labored breaths continued as he shouted, “What...ceremony?!”

His fingers grasped the iron gate as he desperately drew himself closer to Hisano.

“What the hell do you plan to use Nagisa for...?!”

“The same thing you tried to use her for, Gajou.”

Hisano’s voice remained gentle.

And so, in a tone as calm as a placid lake, she stated:

“We will kill Aurora Florestina. This time, for good.”

2

Nagisa Akatsuki rested her head on the edge of the bath, sighing without a care in the world.

It was a large bath in the temple dormitory where the priestesses at Kamioda Temple resided—a stonework bath fed by a natural hot spring.

It was still quite early in the morning, and there was little sign of anyone in the bath area. Nagisa let out another contented sigh as she reveled in solitude.

“Ahh... This feels so good...”

She murmured as she floated on the serene surface of the water.

The bath’s temperature was about 40 degrees Celsius, a comfortable temperature that was neither too hot nor too lukewarm. If rumor was to be

believed, the bath was able to heal muscle and joint pain, both speeding convalescence and granting beautiful skin. Most importantly, it was said to be a spiritually infused spring that excelled at healing those whose spiritual energies had been depleted.

For some reason, Nagisa had lost consciousness and collapsed when she'd arrived at Kamioda Temple the week prior. She'd been asleep for nearly the entire time since. Thanks to that, her winter break homecoming, something she hadn't experienced in four years, had spectacularly gone to waste.

It was under those circumstances that Nagisa's grandmother, Hisano Akatsuki, had commanded she make use of the bath. Apparently, she had said something like *Keep her in the bath as long as possible and heal her body*. That was why Nagisa was immersed in the hot spring so early in the morning.

It could be said that the water agreed with her, but actually, Nagisa's body was quite accustomed to Kamioda's spirit spring. Even if Nagisa, a priestess who had lost her power, was not consciously aware of it, her endurance had surely been worn down due to being far from Itogami Island's vast dragon lines. Borrowing the power of the spirit spring, she had finally made a proper recovery. Nagisa's mood brightened as she felt herself grow stronger.

"Hot springs really are nice. I wish Yukina had come with me. Kojou's probably worried sick. I hope he listens to my voicemail."

Nagisa mumbled to no one in particular as she thought of her older brother and classmates left behind on Itogami Island. It was Nagisa's bad habit to speak a lot, a reaction to having endured a long and lonely hospital life.

Thanks to having suddenly collapsed and the temple being outside of cell signal coverage in the first place, she'd been out of contact with Kojou for an entire week. He was the one who looked after Nagisa, so there was no doubt he was freaking out somewhere at the moment.

She had made a point of explaining the situation in the voicemail she left Kojou the night before, but there was no guarantee that he'd notice. *I hope Kojou doesn't do anything rash.*

"Come to think of it, the last time I was here, Kojou and I came into the bath together..."

Nagisa's face went beet red, submerging her face into the water as she remembered a time when she and her brother both were still in elementary school. For some reason, the unfamiliar bath scared her, so she'd twisted Kojou's arm into going with her.

There certainly wasn't any way they could bathe as brother and sister at their current ages, which made her a little sad. *No, wait, we could wear swimsuits,* thought Nagisa, beginning to seriously mull the idea over when, in the next moment—

Rattle, rattle, craaaash, came a booming sound that echoed throughout the bath.

She then heard a fickle, slightly delayed *Hyah!*

“Wh-who's there?!”

Nagisa nervously poked her head out of the water and looked back.

She saw a figure fallen on her rear beside a crumbled mountain of piled-up bath buckets.

It was a young girl around Nagisa's age. Her foot had slipped on the wet stone, causing her to fall hard on her back, completely naked.

“I-I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry!”

An “Owww” trickled out of the girl in a frail voice as she slowly rose to her feet and began righting the scattered buckets. At a glance, she seemed quite timid or shy.

She looked like she was ready to burst into tears at any moment, but that was apparently her normal expression.

The girl's hair was white, possibly a condition she'd been born with. It was the same pure, glacial white of an arctic fox's coat.

However, what arrested Nagisa's attention was not the girl's hair, but her bare breasts.

“Th-they're huge...”

Nagisa gulped as she stared intently at the girl's naked body.

Almost unfathomable for her petite frame, the girl had a generous pair that bobbed in concert with her movements. Her breasts were immaculate in terms of shape, volume, and breadth, as if Nagisa's idea of the perfect body had been made flesh before her very eyes.

Perhaps noticing Nagisa's gawking, the white-haired girl lifted her head and said, "Ah... I've made you see me in such an unsightly state..."

"No, no, it's no trouble at all."

You've been blessed, thought Nagisa, just barely managing to keep herself from blurting the words out loud.

When the white-haired girl finished tidying up the bath area, she washed her body and sheepishly entered the hot spring itself. She seemed a little too young to be an employee of the temple. Without a doubt, it was Nagisa's first time seeing her.

"Um, do you work here at the temple?"

Nagisa smiled, putting on the most amiable face she could muster. The white-haired girl shook her head frantically.

"N-no, no, not at all. In light of minor circumstances, I am in their care for the moment... That is all."

"Ahh. We're in the same boat, then."

Nagisa grinned as she felt a kinship with the girl. Be it for prayer or ridding oneself of worldly obsessions, Kamioda Temple received numerous guests. The girl was likely visiting for a similar reason.

"I—I am...Shirona. Shirona Kuraki."

The white-haired girl's voice trembled as she introduced herself and bowed her head. Nagisa returned the politeness in kind.

"Very pleased to meet you. Er, I'm—"

"I...I know. Nagisa Akatsuki, yes?"

Shirona had deduced Nagisa's identity before she could introduce herself.

"Well, yes... But why do you know that...?" Nagisa asked, blinking.

“I heard that Ms. Hisano’s granddaughter was coming.”

“Ah, so you know Granny, then.”

“Yes.”

Shirona nodded, lowering her gaze to her own chest. Her heaving breasts were now a faint shade of pink as they floated on the clear water’s surface. The sight of the deep cleavage formed between them made Nagisa think of picturesque fjords carved from a glacier.

For a moment, Nagisa lost herself, consumed by the sight when—

“Um... Would you...like to touch them?”

Her cheeks reddening, Shirona presented her chest to Nagisa in invitation.

“Huh? Is it really okay?!”

Nagisa was thrown for a loop at Shirona’s next comment:

“I—I am sorry... You just—seemed so interested...”

The fingers on both of Nagisa’s hands twitched. “Y-yeah. I am, actually... But you’re really fine with it?”

“Yes. If it pleases you...”

“Th-then I’m not holding back!”

I’d better hurry before Shirona changes her mind, thought Nagisa as she cupped the girl’s breasts. Each palm filled to excess as her hands cradled their bounty. *Aah...* Shirona cooed, a shallow breath escaping her parted lips.

“Ohh, th-this is...!”

Nagisa’s tension level spiked at the remarkable feeling in her hands. Her unwavering palms communicated a heavenly sensation.

“So soft... With just the right amount of firmness. I can feel my fingers getting lost in them... They’re a masterpiece...!”

“Mmm...Nnf...”

Shirona bit her lip as she endured Nagisa’s groping. Her face was awash with embarrassment, but Nagisa was only getting more and more into it. She’d

unwittingly put more energy into fondling Shirona's breasts than intended, but their firmness rebuffed her fingertips. That feeling of utter bliss left Nagisa heaving in ecstasy.

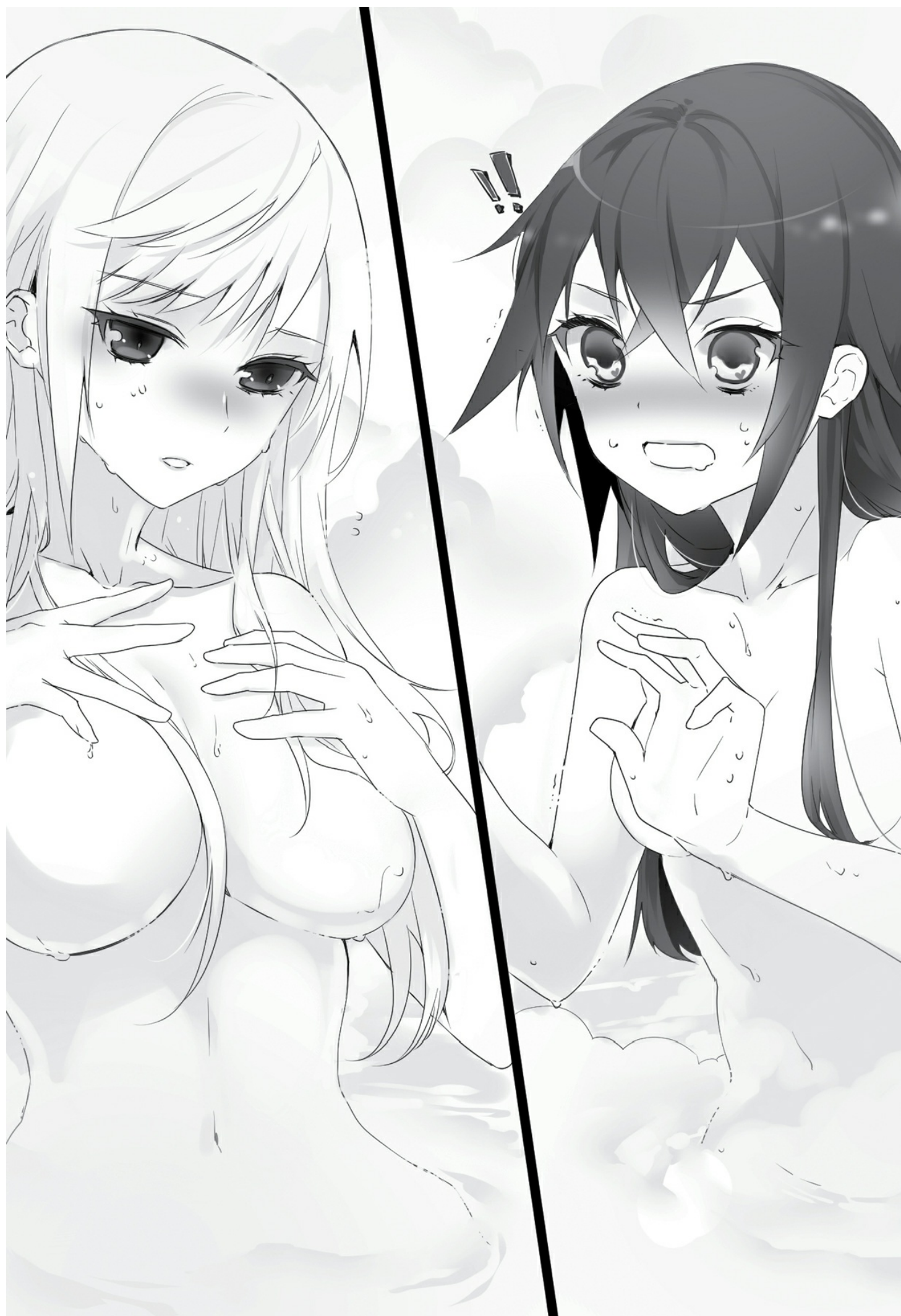
"Haaah... That was close... My mind was in a really far-off place..."

Having drank deep from the well of euphoria that was Shirona's breasts, Nagisa pulled her hands away with visible reluctance. Shirona was now glowing red, unable to meet Nagisa's eyes.

"A-are you satisfied now...?"

"Yeah. Wow... That was incredible. Thanks."

"I see... However..."



Shirona finally looked back at Nagisa with teary eyes. Then suddenly, an ominous smile crept over Shirona's lips. Without warning, her right hand gently grasped both of Nagisa's hands.

"Now it's my turn."

"Eh...?!"

Nagisa let out a yelp when Shirona suddenly pulled her close. When Nagisa tried to flee, Shirona embraced her from behind, pressing her own flesh against Nagisa's.

"Tee-hee... Nagisa, your back is so pretty."

"Sh-Shirona, hold on a sec...!"

"I will not. You can't be the only one who gets to touch others."

"Eeep!" went Nagisa, her entire body going rigid at the gentle whisper into her ear. A sensation like an electric current crawled up her back, sapping her limbs of strength.

"B-but, um, my body's small, like a little kid's, especially in the chest, not amazing like yours, Shirona, plus I ate too much for breakfast, so my tummy's all bloated, and..."

"No, no. Even budding flowers have their beauty. You should have more confidence in yourself."

Against Nagisa's desperate, rambling explanation, she received only a "Heh" in response. Shirona spoke with a dominant tone that made her seem like a completely different person from the fainthearted girl from before. Her voice became ruthless. The phrasing, reminiscent of a much older person, made Nagisa second-guess Shirona's age.

"Sh-Shirona... Th-this isn't the place for... *Hyah?!'*"

"It's okay. You are but a young, vivacious, unripe fruit. I simply must respond in kind."

Nagisa let out another yelp when Shirona touched a particularly sensitive spot on her side. Nagisa's innocent reaction brought a sadistic expression over

Shirona's face.

Shirona had become a different person altogether. Perhaps it was dissociative identity disorder, or perhaps possession—the exact mechanism at work was unclear, but for whatever reason, her personality had undergone a dramatic change. It was even possible that *this* Shirona was her true personality.

Either way, the abrupt change in Shirona left Nagisa completely at her mercy.

“Heh-heh... Your body is so fun to play with. How does it feel...here?”

“Ah... Shirona, n...not there...!”

“Ohhh, resisting, are you? That's adorable. Well then, how about this, and this?”

“Nnngh?!”

Shirona gently stroked the insides of Nagisa's thighs. Drained of strength, Nagisa was half in a daze as she floated faceup on the water's surface. With Nagisa in this position, Shirona's tongue slithered toward her neck. Shirona's white hair was moving as if it had a will of its own, slowly coiling around Nagisa's flesh.

“Shirona, you're—!”

Nagisa looked at Shirona with wide-open eyes. Nagisa's once-limp body tensed in fear. Nagisa was not looking at Shirona herself, but at the nature of the soul resting within her.

“That is Hisano's granddaughter for you. To think you could discern my true nature so easily.”

Shirona stated it in a tone not unlike admiration. Nagisa flailed, trying to break free from her clutches—

“There is nothing to fear. I may resemble a demon, but in truth, I am no such thing. If there *is* a demon present, it would be you... *Avrora, the twelfth Kaleid Blood.*”

“N-noo...!”

As Nagisa continued to resist, Shirona leaned in closer and peered into her

eyes. In that instant, Nagisa's mind was sent reeling. Her vision went white from the massive influx of information.

"Ah—"

Her strength seemingly at an end, Nagisa fell into a slumber. The only sounds echoing throughout the bathhouse were the "*Haah, Haah*" of her short, even breaths.

Shirona gazed down at the girl as she licked her own lips.

With Nagisa now unconscious, Shirona picked up the girl's body with one arm, then made her way out of the bath.

With a single flash of her left hand, two brand-new white priestess outfits appeared out of thin air. Shirona laid Nagisa down and pulled one of the outfits over her shoulders, clothing herself in white as well.

As if that was some kind of cue, the golden radiance vanished from Shirona's eyes.

Returning to her normal timid demeanor, Shirona gasped when she noticed Nagisa laying right in front of her.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

Shirona gently whispered to Nagisa's sleeping face and gently closed her own eyes.

Shirona Kuraki possessed two wills. One was the will of Kuraki, passed down generation after generation. The other was a girl acting as a vessel for the power of darkness.

It was Kuraki who decided how that power would be used, but it was she who actually controlled it—

Once again, she was unable to escape Kuraki's original sin.

"I'm sorry," Shirona murmured once more. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

Whether she said it in search of forgiveness, even she did not know.

The only parking lot with a scenic view of Kannawa Lake was packed full of Self-Defense Forces vehicles.

Most were supply trucks and command vehicles for aerial reconnaissance drones, but they included lightly armored scout vehicles and even APC's with large-caliber weapons. There were enough reinforcements to occupy a small city or two.

They belonged to the Self-Defense Forces' Special Attack Mage Regiment, operating directly under the Minister of Defense—an offensive special forces unit specializing in countering magical disasters.

A tent deployed at the center of the grounds analyzed surveillance data gathered by the drones without pause. The operators' faces were thick with traces of fatigue, no doubt feeling the strain of their endless vigil.

Even so, they maintained focus, for the surveillance data they were analyzing had picked up on the strange presence at the bottom of Kannawa Lake.

Sensing the atmosphere inside the tent, Yui Haba's face hardened in turn.

Yui, serving under the Lion King Agency, was a complete outsider at that command post. Furthermore, the incident was the apprentice Sword Shaman's de facto first battle. Under the circumstances, remaining calm was hopeless. Feeling out of place, all she could do was bite her lip and stand in a corner of the tent when—

"Calm down, Yui Haba. What will happen if even a specialist like you becomes tense?"

Hisano Akatsuki, wearing her *dougi* uniform, spoke gently in an effort to bring Yui to her senses.

In contrast to Yui, Hisano, who had worked as an instructor for many of the Special Attack Mage Regiment currently on duty, was accustomed to the atmosphere inside the tent. She was also the recipient of trust from the Self-Defense Forces' officer corps.

And yet, notwithstanding the cold impression she gave off, she showed concern for Yui, who was little more than excess baggage at present. Yui could understand why Hisano, already retired from her Attack Mage career,

was still revered by so many.

“I—I am sorry. This is my first time, and I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to do—”

Yui lowered her eyes and haltingly conveyed the truth. She not only viewed herself as a hindrance, but she was also frightened of the military officers looking at her like she was a pest.

“Then you should relax a little, I would say. You are a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, so trust not in logic, but in your own senses. You are here because of your Spirit Sight, are you not?”

“Y-yes.”

Hisano’s words served to steady Yui’s mind.

A young girl like Yui was in that command center because much was expected of her sharp senses as a spiritualist. The officers, too, would surely accept Hisano’s explanation. Subconsciously or not, if felt like the wariness and opposition they held toward Yui had softened.

The change in atmosphere allowed the command post to finally regain its composure, whereupon Yui shifted her attention to Kannawa Lake beneath them. A light morning mist surrounded the lake; the quiet, gentle surface of the water was exposed to view.

To the naked eye, nothing was amiss. Its overflowing beauty made it a tourist attraction. However, Yui’s senses as a spirit medium caught the dense mass of power that existed at the bottom of the lake. It felt neither divine nor malignant; the collective mass of overwhelming spiritual energy was simply *different*.

The Self-Defense Forces’ underwater search devices had confirmed the mass’s existence as well. The object’s form, resembling the shellfish mother-of-pearl, wavered like a mirage, for which they had dubbed it Avalon.

It was surrounded by a black bulwark that rejected all, so they knew not what lay within. Even Yui’s Spirit Sight was unable to discern Avalon’s true nature. All she felt was a stirring deep in her chest—a portent of ill tidings.

“Avalon’s status?”

A new man in camouflage fatigues entered the tent, posing his request to the operator in an urgent tone.

The man was probably thirty years old, more or less. He was tall with a weathered face that resembled a hunting dog’s. He was Special Major Azama, the unit’s commanding officer. Apparently, he was just returning to the command tent after less than two hours’ rest.

Azama, noticing Hisano and Yuiri on standby, offered his respects. He showed no scorn toward Yuiri despite the girl’s young age, a sign of a young, capable commander.

A female officer sitting in the operator’s chair suppressed her emotions as she stated to Azama in a low voice:

“The rate of activity continues to rise. In the last forty-eight hours, pressure within the shell has risen 1.25 percent. Surface demonic energy density is seven hundred and seventy-four times its base value—it’s dangerous, sir.”

“Fast,” murmured Azama quietly.

“Yes,” said the female operator, her voice trembling. “If the demonic energy density continues increasing at the current pace, there will be substantial effects on life-forms in the vicinity within ten days. In the worst-case scenario, it is possible that urban areas may also suffer dam—”

“We’ll get this under control before that happens. Isn’t that right, Akatsuki-sensei?”

“Yes, of course,” said Hisano, responding to Azama’s call. “Since ancient times, Kamioda Temple took thorough measures to subdue the awakening houda whenever the signs presented themselves. This time shall prove no different.”

“*Houda?*” asked Azama, his brows furrowing. “That is the name of what sleeps inside Avalon?”

“It is the name recorded in ancient documents. The records were from before this crude puddle they call Kannawa Lake was constructed, but...it is said that

honda are the prelude to calamity.”

“Calamity, you say,” Azama muttered. “I see.” He gave Hisano an impetuous smile. “So Kamiyoda Temple is the holy shrine founded to quell that disaster.”

“If that is how you wish to think of it, I shall not object.”

“In other words, the means to put a stop to Avalon’s abnormal increase in activity has been passed down to you?”

“It is because I know it that the Lion King Agency has accepted my participation in this operation.....Shirona?”

Without warning, Hisano looked over her shoulder and called out to someone. That very instant, Yuiri felt the air sway behind her. In her surprise, all she could manage was an “Eh?”

A petite-framed girl with white hair had appeared. Even if she was only an apprentice, Yuiri, a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, should never have let her approach that closely without her noticing.

“Of course, that is precisely how it is.”

The girl spoke those words to Hisano in a clear voice—but in a manner peculiar to an old woman.

“Lord Kuraki...,” Azama addressed the girl.

Shirona looked over her shoulder, her beautiful white hair fluttering as she smiled.

“It has been some time, Major Azama. I am glad to see you in good health.”

“Kuraki...of the Three Saints...?! ”

Having drawn her sword in half a heartbeat, Yuiri took a stance, her entire body seized with tension.

Shirona Kuraki was one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency—and being at the top of the Lion King Agency meant being among the highest class of all Attack Mages in Japan. Even pointing a blade her way was asking for death, and no one would have been able to say anything if she killed Yuiri on the spot.

However, Shirona did not even glance Yuiri’s way, helping herself to a metal

chair beside her as she said, “We shall make full use of the ceremony passed down through the holy shrine of Kamiyoda, Hisano. I take it you have no complaints? Originally, the task was yours, and it is also for the sake of saving your granddaughter.”

Shirona’s words, spoken in a challenging manner, were met by Hisano with a solemn nod. “Do the other Saints know of the details of the ceremony?”

“Shizuka knows not. Appearances aside, she is pure of heart, so it is best she does not know.” Shirona smiled wryly and shook her head. Her expression was like a mischievous child’s.

“...To be honest, the fact that you chose a drastic measure surprised me,” Hisano said with a deep exhale in a show of resignation.

The turbulent echo of her words made Yuiri’s body go rigid once more.

The ceremony Shirona was undertaking was likely a dangerous gamble, enough that even the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency would not see eye to eye. But even if Hisano said *Yes, let’s stop this*, Shirona was unlikely to be persuaded. Knowing this, Hisano’s expression seemed almost casual.

Hisano remained stoic up until Shirona said, “I briefly spoke to your granddaughter.”

It was like she was speaking about a girl far younger than herself.

“A very friendly child. She reminds me of you in your younger days. You were right around her age when we first met, were you not?”

“Shirona... You didn’t...”

When, for some reason, a pained expression came over Hisano, Shirona shot her a shameless grin.

“I am sorry, unlike the other Saints, I am not working on behalf of the government. I shall eliminate the menace of The Cleansing by any means necessary.”

“The menace of The Cleansing... A god-killing weapon, then...”

The sharpness of Hisano’s gaze increased. Then, she faced Yuiri, almost as if she had suddenly remembered something.

“What do you think of this, Yui Haba?”

“Huh?! M...me...?!”

Yui was flustered from the conversation suddenly being tossed her way. Yui, an apprentice Sword Shaman, could not possibly answer a question about The Cleansing, which was supposed to be top-secret. In the first place, no one had told her the core details of the operation, let alone Avalon’s true nature.

“Um... But I do think ‘menace’ might be a little off...”

Backed into a corner, Yui voiced her honest opinion in a fit of desperation.

Hisano’s eyebrows faintly twitched.

“What do you mean, a little off?”

“I mean... In other words, I feel like Avalon is not a calamity in and of itself. It feels like it’s just sleeping, like it’s protecting something... Er... So that’s why...”

Yui’s voice became fainter as her halting explanation continued. It wasn’t like she had hard evidence to begin with. To be blunt, Yui would be hard-pressed to explain just why she felt that way.

However, Hisano did not reproach Yui. Her eyes remained trained upon the girl, silent as she contemplated something, whereupon the elder suggested, “Shirone... Would you mind taking her in my stead?”

“Oh?” murmured Shirone, seemingly delighted to hear Hisano’s words. Hisano naming an immature Sword Shaman like Yui to act in her stead was something of a surprise.

“How interesting. I do not mind.”

“Huh? Me instead of Miss Hisano? ...What?!”

Indeed, it was Yui who was thrown off. Even if she hadn’t been told the essentials of the operation, Yui knew well enough just how important this ceremony was. Furthermore, the very life of Hisano’s granddaughter was at stake.

Yui couldn’t even imagine taking over the duties of a legendary Attack Mage like Hisano under such circumstances. Of course, Shirone did not spare the

slightest concern for Yuiri's bewilderment.

Clad in white priestess attire, Shirona declared, "Now then, shall we begin? Make the necessary preparations, Major Azama."

In that instant, tension ran through the SDF tent as if someone had sliced it with a razor. Without a word, Hisano lowered her eyes; Yuiri clenched her hands out of nervousness.

"Let us begin...," repeated Shirona once more, "...the ceremony to vanquish the former Fourth Primogenitor."

4

Nagisa Akatsuki was floating in water. The transparent prison stretched as far as she could see. Everything around her was blue like the deep sky, and a flickering band of light seemed to trickle down from the water's surface like gentle rain.

It was not hard to breathe. It was not cold. It was a strange feeling, as if she was floating inside a gemstone.

"Where...is this?"

Nagisa murmured as her gaze slowly wandered. Her untied hair was long, trailing her movement like the tail of a tropical fish. Also, there wasn't a single scrap of clothing covering Nagisa's body. The pale light shining from the water's surface traced geometric patterns like waves on Nagisa's pale flesh.

"What?! Why am I naked?! Come to think of it, I was in the temple's bath—"

Maybe I'm dreaming, thought Nagisa, touching her cheek. There was nothing alarming about her breathing or body temperature, but naturally, the circumstance of being submerged and floating in a body of water was surreal.

However, Nagisa was certain she wasn't dreaming.

The scenery before her eyes was simply too detailed, full of realism not associated with mental imagery. Nagisa's own consciousness was crystal clear. If anything, she felt even more aware than when she was normally awake.

Nagisa's heightened senses detected someone nestled against her as she floated in the water. A white-haired girl's small-statured body was supporting Nagisa from behind.

"So...you've awakened, Nagisa?"

"Shirona?!"

Nagisa turned her body toward the voice of the girl called Shirona Kuraki. Suddenly, she lost her balance. Just as she was about to go under, Shirona caught her arm and pulled her close.

"Are you not cold?"

"Ah, no."

Actually, the warmth of Shirona's skin feels really good on my back, thought Nagisa, a hairsbreadth from speaking her internal thoughts aloud. She still didn't know if what she was experiencing was reality, but the supple feeling of Shirona's skin was exactly like the first time they'd met.

"Where is this?" asked Nagisa.

"Kannawa Lake. Just as they said, it is easier to stabilize a spirit body in the water."

"In...the lake?"

"Only your mind, disconnected from the body. It resembles...an out-of-body experience."

"Huh? Out-of-body experience?"

Surprised by Shirona's explanation, Nagisa looked down at her own faint, translucent body. Her having become a ghost didn't feel real, but once it was pointed out to her, a lot of things started making sense. Of course, a ghost wouldn't feel cold from the water or have trouble breathing within it.

"So that means you're a living ghost, too, Shirona? Where are our actual bodies?"

"Right now, they're...at the altar of Kannawa Lake."

"Altar?"

Nagisa shifted her mind above her head. She could not directly see it from that distance, but thanks to her out-of-body experience, she immediately sensed the altar's presence.

Atop the surface of the sunlit lake, an altar floated, resembling those used for prayer through dance. It was a simplified altar built on a wooden raft.

Occupying the altar was a girl in a school uniform with a long, silver sword—seemingly watching over Nagisa, wearing priestess attire as she lay there.

She looked much like she always did. But the one difference from the usual Nagisa was the color of her hair. It was blond, varying in color from time to time depending on the flow and ebb of the light. It was colored like the rainbow, as if from a billowing flame.

“No... That...isn't me...”

“Correct. That is Aurora Florestina, she who was once the Fourth Primogenitor...the twelfth Kaleid Blood, Aurora. You should know her far better than I... However...”

Shirona's words became murmurs and melted together, and something coursed into Nagisa's mind. Her ethereal body wailed at the vast torrent of information. However, at the same time, she felt like some kind of invisible chain binding her mind was being torn away bit by bit. Memories sealed off were resurrected, and she could vividly see scenes that had been locked away in darkness.

Black wings. Beast Vassals. A vortex of blood. The Blazing Banquet. Root Aurora—these were the abominable memories she had purportedly erased by her own hand.

The memories of the Twelfth that slept inside of Nagisa—

Buffeted by fragments of onrushing memories, Nagisa looked up at Shirona and asked, “What are you trying to do with her...?”

Shirona looked ready to break into tears as she pointed toward the bottom of the lake.

Nagisa's eyes wavered as they followed in the direction Shirona indicated. She

shuddered, feeling a chill, assailed by a shapeless fear. A black, multifaceted object resembling a spiral shell rested there, seemingly buried at the bottom of the lake.

Its surface resembled a black jewel's, shimmering in irregular ways like a mirage. It was a bizarre object that seemed both man-made and born as a living creature—it was unlike anything on the Earth's surface.

“What...is that...?”

“It is the ward that seals the calamity that sleeps within the land of Kamioda. The people of the Self-Defense Forces call it Avalon.”

Shirona gave a subdued explanation in response to Nagisa's palpable fear.

“That's...a ward...?”

“Everything is...okay. A great many people are working to quell it. Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency and a special unit of the Self-Defense Forces have gathered together under Miss Hisano's command.”

“Granny's in charge...?”

“The original duty of Kamioda Temple was to watch over and subdue the calamity sleeping within...so please...”

“Subdue...?”

Nagisa trained her gaze upon the black mass at the bottom of the lake once more. The outer shell, shifting in an irregular manner, resembled a thin membrane sealing a vast amount of demonic energy within. One could not look at it without wondering *Would, at some point, the pressure grow past the membrane's limit, popping it like a paper balloon...?*

And just how would you subdue a thing like that? Such were the doubts Nagisa harbored.

“Avalon's seal was strengthened by offering priestesses with superior spiritual power... This was the holy duty Kamioda Temple was established to fulfill. The last ceremony was conducted long before, over seventy years ago...”

“Offering...?”

Nagisa had a powerful, dramatic reaction to the vague statement Shirona gave in reply.

For an instant, an image rose into the back of Nagisa's mind—an image of a girl asleep in a block of ice in a ruin of a foreign land. She, too, had been offered to subdue a calamity.

Roused by anger even she could not control, Nagisa's lips trembled as she glared at Shirona.

"You can't mean... Human sacrifice? You're going to offer a living person...?!"

"I am saying that is what they did in the past. A pure maiden was submerged into the lake to avert calamity—identical ceremonies have been conducted in all corners of the world." Shirona's rebuttal was weak against Nagisa's heated interrogation. "However, this ceremony will be different. The sacrifice is a demon, not a person. Furthermore, she is already...dead, her mind loitering in the living world through nothing more than your power."

"Shirona, that sounds like... Don't tell me, you're going to use that girl...?!"

Nagisa looked overhead with a despairing thought.

Why was her body lying on the altar? And why had only her soul been separated from the flesh like an out-of-body experience?

She had already grasped the answer.

It was because Shirona and the others were after *the soul of Aurora* that slept inside of Nagisa.

The altar established on top of the lake was probably for the purpose of extracting the sacrificed soul and transferring it to Avalon at the bottom of the lake. However, Shirona's ability had already temporarily separated Nagisa's spirit body from her flesh. They were going to use the soul left behind in Nagisa's body for the sacrifice—in other words, Aurora's soul only.

"The sacrifice is an artificial vampire created to seal one of the Beast Vassals torn away from the Fourth Primogenitor. That is Aurora Florestina's true nature. There is no more fitting sacrifice for quelling calamity. Nagisa, surely you understand this."

Shirona wished to confirm Nagisa's intuition.

In a certain sense, it was a well-polished operation.

When Avalon became active, spiritual energy was provided from the outside to strengthen its seal. The source of that spiritual energy was offering up a person—a human sacrifice. And then, Shirona and the others had set their eyes on Avrora.

They would use the soul of the deceased Avrora as their sacrifice.

Furthermore, to begin with, Avrora was a vampire constructed as a vessel to seal away the soul of the Fourth Primogenitor. Even if she had already lost her flesh and blood, her spirit still contained off-the-charts demonic energy. If the goal was to strengthen Avalon by providing it with demonic energy, she certainly was the most suitable sacrifice possible.

And if Avrora's soul was destroyed, Nagisa would be relieved of the duty of being her icon. Hisano knew this; hence, she was complicit in such a cruel plan to save Nagisa, her own granddaughter, whose body had grown frail from overuse of her spiritual energies. But—

“No, Shirona. You mustn't...!”

—Nagisa spread both arms wide, as if to shield Avrora, sleeping atop the altar above.

However, in her current state, this was all Nagisa could do. Even if she tried to return to her own body and obstruct the ceremony, there was no escape from the blinding white spirit threads extending from Shirona's hair; they would entangle Nagisa's spirit and keep her under the water's surface. The spirit threads were no doubt the catalysts through which she exercised her ability to freely manipulate the spirits of others.

“Please, Nagisa. Listen to me. It is too late. If you recklessly approach her now, your soul will be caught up in the ceremony as well... So please...”

The number of spirit threads increased, and with these, Shirona further bound Nagisa's spirit.

The sacrificial ceremony at the altar above the lake had begun. Countless,

huge magic circles covered the entire surface of the lake, and a bundle of spirit threads resembling a giant tree stretched toward Avalon, resting on the lake bed.

It was through these spirit threads that they meant to send Avrora's demonic energy to Avalon.

"In the first place, it was reckless to have a Kaleid Blood possess you for several years. No matter how excellent a priestess you may be, the continued possession only whittles down your own life span... Please, this is for your own good."

"No, Shirona! I'm not talking about that!" Nagisa shouted, twisting her face in fear. Neither Shirona nor the others had noticed yet.

Nagisa was indeed a powerful priestess, inheriting the spiritual strength of her grandmother, but at the same time, she'd inherited the knack of a natural psychometer from her mother. That was why Nagisa alone had arrived at the truth that the Attack Mages, Shirona included, had yet to realize: the true nature of that they called Avalon—

"That's not a seal. It was there to protect her. You shouldn't have awakened her!"

"Nagi...sa? What...are you saying...?!"

Shirona looked bewildered for the first time. But by then, it was already too late.

The trunk of the spirit tree stretching from the altar arrived at Avalon; it pulsed as the demonic energy remaining in Avrora's spirit coursed into it.

"What...is this...?!" Shirona's voice trembled as she detected the sudden change occurring at the bottom of the lake.

Cracks ran across Avalon's surface. Countless figures emerged from the crevices. These forms had the appearance of living creatures with flesh that glinted like steel. They had the compound eyes of bees and long serpentine tails.

Their silhouettes were clearly those of organic life-forms; yet, they were

creatures with man-made characteristics.

The appearance of those creatures was no doubt contrary to even Shirona's expectations. Nagisa could feel her unease through the spirit threads through which she entwined Nagisa's body.

However, the surprises did not end there.

A giant figure appeared in the water, seemingly to strike back against the steel creatures.

It was a mass of sentient, demonic energy—a summoned beast from another world. Its upper body resembled a woman, and the lower, a fish. Wings sprouted from its back, and it had talons like a bird of prey's.

Perhaps it was a mermaid; perhaps a siren—it was a vampiric Beast Vassal, its flesh as clear as a glacier. It was the alter ego sealed inside of Avrora.

“...No... Don't...”

Nagisa looked up at the watery Beast Vassal, pleading as if in prayer.

But her voice did not carry.

Cut off from her own body, Nagisa had no way to convey her thoughts to Avrora.

The vast demonic energy emitted by the siren's wings were freezing the entirety of Kannawa Lake. This was a destructive cold, a flash freeze that made any kind of matter brittle, reducing it to dust.

Even the vast magical power contained within Avalon could not withstand such a blow.

That was why Nagisa shouted:

“Avrora! Dooooon't—!”

In an instant, Nagisa's vision was arrested by a dazzling blue light.

All of Kannawa Lake was transformed into a giant crystal of ice.

White mist and icy snow would cover the mountains all around.

Dimly aware of this in a far corner of her mind, Nagisa felt the light swallow

her spiritual body.

5

Shio Hikawa was sitting face-to-face with Gajou Akatsuki, separated by the iron bars of his cell.

“I’m not sure what...‘doing it my way’ really means...”

Head bowed, hands holding her knees, Shio put the philosophical question to her lips. Her tone of voice seemed stout, but at the margins, it was immersed in gloom without an outlet.

Gajou Akatsuki, bound within the cell, listened to Shio’s confession.

Shio had ignored him at first, but with the obstinate Gajou continually shooting the breeze, her luck had run dry the instant she’d responded. It started with talking about their favorite foods and spread to the topic of which astrological sign they were born under. Once logic quizzes to test one’s personality began, it switched at some point to her talking about her problems. Shio was levying complaints all on her own, with Gajou playing the role of good listener to the hilt.

Why am I talking to a man like that? the hostile Shio thought, but before she knew it, she was blurting out all kinds of things about her private life to Gajou. As shady as he looked, Gajou had the silver tongue of a host club top pick. Though she had the vague sense it was a bad idea, Shio just couldn’t stop herself at that point.

“So even I think it’d be good if I can just be like Yuiri. Yuiri’s really cute, I mean. She’s so cheerful, so honest, so feminine... I really like Yuiri, but compared to her, I think I’m pretty pathetic, really...”

“But Yuiri likes you, too, doesn’t she, Shio? She trusts you completely, right?”

When the conversation threatened to break off, Gajou murmured with perfect timing. His words, surely with precious little basis behind them, took Shio by surprise, flustering her.

“That’s just because my ritual spellcraft scores happen to be better than

hers... But Yuiri's the one who's really amazing. She was the one who was going to get a Schneewaltzer."

"Heh, seriously...? That's really somethin', then..."

"Yeah."

Shio felt a small sense of satisfaction at seeing Gajou genuinely impressed. For all her complaints, it made Shio happy to hear Yuiri complimented.

Gajou made no clumsy effort to console her. Instead, he accurately responded to Shio's real wish, the one she herself didn't realize. That both irritated Shio and, at the same time, felt oddly pleasant.

"You're really something, Shio."

Gajou topped it off by praising Shio as well. She soured and asked, "What, are you making fun of me?"

"No, no. I mean, you try so hard to be someone who measures up to Yuiri, the friend you really like, that you get down in the dumps about it."

"W-well, that's... Of course I do..."

"Oh, it's really something that you think this is normal. No wonder Yuiri trusts you."

Gajou spoke with an odd degree of confidence. Even as Shio was mildly put off by his know-it-all way of speaking, her cheeks faintly reddened.

"D-don't talk about Yuiri like that...!"

There was no strength to Shio's rebuttal. Even if she understood this was Gajou Akatsuki's technique at work, she couldn't possibly think of being praised like that as a bad thing. Thanks to the one-sidedness of the initial battle, she'd had a rather poor impression of Gajou, but she began to think *Maybe he's not such a bad person*. In fact, he was surprisingly easy on the eyes. She might even grudgingly admit that he was rather attractive—

"Um... Th-thank you...for hearing me out."

Shio wrung every last smidgeon of courage out of herself to say those words. Her voice was small, almost a whisper, but they were close enough that Gajou

had to have noticed.

However, he did not reply. Suddenly, his face went blank as he glared outside.

“Ah... Gajou Akatsuki?”

“Hey, Shio... Doesn’t the air feel...*strange* to you?”

“Eh...?!”

When Gajou asked, his face dead serious, Shio turned her attention to the surrounding area. An abnormal chill was coursing inside the storehouse. It was too cold, even for the middle of winter. The air had gone white from the precipitous drop in temperature.

Shio gasped, breathing in hard as she realized the cold air throbbed of demonic energy.

“What’s this...unpleasant feeling...?”

A moment after Shio let that murmur trickle out, the land of Kamioda District shuddered.

It was not an intermittent shaking like an earthquake. It was an instantaneous jolt, as if a giant weight had fallen close by.

The source of the tremor was probably Kannawa Lake—the direction from which Yui and the others were conducting the ceremony. However, the hindrance of the demonic-energy-infused cloud of cold air prevented Shio from learning just what had happened at Kannawa Lake. All she had to go on was the vague unease in her chest.

“This tremor... It doesn’t feel like just an earthquake... I guess the old hag messed up?”

Gajou spat insults as he rose to his feet within the cell. Something clattered to the ground. Shio looked down, gawking.

“Wait a... Why are your manacles off?! How did...?!”

At some point, the metal manacles purportedly binding Gajou to the cell had come off. The supposedly double-constructed lock components fell away in pieces.

“As for *how*, I’m used to this kind of thing in my line of work.”

Gajou rotated his now free ankle joints as he spoke in a carefree tone.

Shio stared dumbfounded at Gajou as she insisted, “A-aren’t you supposed to be an archeologist?!”

“I do field work all over the place, so all sorts of things happen...,” Gajou replied in a lighthearted tone before looking above his head. “Well, damn...! Shio, above you!”

“Eh?!”

Reacting to Gajou’s shout, Shio shifted her gaze toward the sky. That instant decided whether Shio lived or died. A glimmering, steel-colored creature broke through the storehouse’s ceiling, right above Shio’s head.

“What’s...that?!”

The creature was three or four meters in length. It was a bizarre monster with a head like a hornet, the body of a snake, and dragon wings. The same moment it detected Shio’s presence, it opened its maw, attacking without a moment’s pause.

If Gajou hadn’t warned her, the creature would have doubtlessly torn Shio limb from limb without her even lifting a finger...

“Resonate—!”

Shio shouted as she fished out every spell scroll she had in the breast pocket of her school uniform. With ritual magic poured into them, the spell scrolls transformed into countless birds of prey that assaulted the monster.

The specialty of Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency was offensive ritual magic using *shikigami*. Though the monster easily struck down the first, second, and even the third *shikigami* attacking it, countless more surrounded it, dulling its movements, finally causing it to crash to the ground.

She finally managed to stop the steel monster in its tracks by using every spell scroll on hand. Shio had no room to see that for herself; she tottered forward on the spot.

Shio had used seventeen *shikigami* for the purpose of counterattacking

against a single monster. Shio was something of an honors student at High God Forest, but she lacked the monstrous talent in spellcraft possessed by her old classmate, Sayaka Kirasaka.

Ordinarily, the steel creature was an enemy on a level beyond Shio's ability to fight alone. It was sheer luck that she'd barely managed to bring it down.

However, there was no time to rest easy, for Gajou heard new wingbeats above Shio's head.

Creatures greatly resembling the one from before were heading for the storehouse. Furthermore, it wasn't one or two: There were over twelve, and that was just what he could see. They practically filled the sky in their approach.

"Such numbers..."

Shio's face went pale with despair. No matter how you sliced it, the enemy's numbers were simply too great. She had no spell scrolls left with which to create *shikigami*, nor did she have any time to prepare a wide-area ritual spell.

If only Yuiri were here..., thought Shio, biting her lip.

With a Sword Shaman skilled in close combat drawing off the creatures and playing for time, even Shio had a card to play: the trump card belonging only to the Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency—

"Get down!"

Shio stood rooted to the spot as a harsh voice rang out from right behind her. The voice spurred Shio to lower her posture without thinking. After she did, the lead creature of the swarm swooped down to attack her.

Shio was resigned to death as the huge, steel creature seemed to writhe during its descent.

Then her eardrums trembled from the metallic roar that shook the very air.

The creature that had appeared right before Shio's eyes was sent flying from a blow to its side. The exploding flames unleashed by the blow contained concentrated, high-density ritual energy.

It was an attack from a spell gun, the ritual energy sealed using a bullet made from precious metals.

“Gajou Akatsuki?! Where did you get a gun from...?!”

Gajou Akatsuki was standing inside the cell in a shooting stance, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. The round he'd fired had blasted the steel creature apart, saving Shio's life.

The shotgun was surrounded by thin gun smoke as Gajou reloaded it and walked toward the cell's iron-barred gate. Then Gajou exited the cell, slipping past the bars as if he were a mirage.

“Physical transmission...?! No...not that... What kind of ability is that...?!” Shio shouted in bewilderment as she watched Gajou casually walk out of the cell.

Physical transmission was a super-difficult magic on par with spatial manipulation. However, the technique Gajou had used differed somewhat from the usual ritual for transmission. She didn't sense him using magical energy. It almost felt like...the human being called Gajou Akatsuki was never in the cell to begin with.

“About twenty years ago, I got lost in a weird ruin in central Asia, y'see...”

Gajou sent a listless smile the confused Shio's way. His shotgun spewed fire once more, destroying a third creature.

“The ruin survey team with me was all wiped out. I was the only survivor, but half my body is on ‘the other side,’ even now.”

“I see... You returned from death... The Death Returnee, Gajou Akatsuki...!”

Shio recalled Gajou's nickname. He was the man who had returned from the Land of the Dead, a being who should not exist in their world—and ever since, his body straddled the boundary between this world and the next.

Gajou Akatsuki had both been inside the cell...and nowhere in the human world at all. No matter how stout an iron-barred gate, it could not hold a being who had not truly been there in the first place.

“It came at a pretty high cost, but thanks to that, I can hide things on me...like this.”

Without warning, Gajou tossed his empty shotgun aside and opened both arms wide. An oversize weapon appeared in both hands, seemingly out of thin

air. Across time and space, he materialized the weapons stored in his armory in the Land of the Dead.

“A—a machine gun?!”

“Picking ’em off one by one isn’t gonna cut it, so—”

Gajou then raked the swarm of creatures with automatic fire from the large-caliber army machine gun. It didn’t have the same power as the spell gun, but the density of the barrage—over six hundred rounds a minute—was overwhelming. The powerful bullets, specialized for taking down demon beasts, were highly effective, riddling the approaching creatures with holes.

“Shio, your demon-quelling bow! Burn them all away!”

“I—I don’t need you to tell me that...!”

Shio reached a hand toward the silver recurve bow she kept on a holster behind her hip. Gajou was keeping the creatures busy, giving her what was probably the best possible chance to use her bow.

“Certify request! Freikugel Plus Proto Three—unlock!”

Shio lifted up the folded recurve bow as she intoned the activation command. Recognizing Shio’s ritual energy coursing into it, the metallic recurve bow greatly expanded. The safety had been disengaged.

“Registered archer, Shio Hikawa, confirmed. Freikugel Plus, active.”

Seeing that the demon-quelling bow had activated, Shio nocked a metallic arrow from the holster on her thigh.

For an instant, she closed her eyes, burning into the back of her mind the positions of the thirty-odd creatures. Shio’s personal specialty was multi-locking on sorcerous targets. Even if she couldn’t hold a candle to Sayaka Kirasaka’s inborn talent with spellcraft, she was confident that she’d trained every bit as extensively as that girl had.

Furthermore, Freikugel Plus was the holy armament that had been redesigned to take full advantage of Shio’s abilities.

“I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee! Let there be light—!”

The silver arrow Shio unleashed soared through the sky, tracing multilayered magic circles in its wake. The whistle on the tip of the ritual arrow was able to generate incantations at a density and great volume impossible for human lungs, creating a large-area spell.

Countless blasts of wind swirled about.

Shio had generated ritual energy blades resembling thunderbolts. These poured toward the surface with the speed of lightning, unerring in their aim as they impaled each and every one of the steel-colored creatures.

“...Ohh, nice. That’s a Lion King Agency Shamanic War Dancer for you.”

Having used up her ritual energy, Shio tottered and slumped forward, whereupon Gajou held her steadily from behind.

Shio’s attack had swept away the entire swarm of creatures.

Freikugel Plus was the completed form of the area-suppression weapon the Lion King Agency had continued developing in secret. It was the sheer power of that demon-purging bow that allowed it to overwhelm the horde of creatures.

As a result, the noncombatants remaining at the temple were spared the danger of being attacked by the creatures, at least for the time being. Perhaps Hisano had left Shio behind because she’d foreseen that possibility from the beginning.

“That said, this ain’t good. If creatures managed to penetrate even the temple’s ward, does that mean the unit surrounding Kannawa Lake was wiped out...?”

Gajou twisted his lips as he glared at Kannawa Lake, which was submerged in white mist.

The interference of dense, cold air infused with demonic energy in the surroundings of the man-made dam meant he couldn’t blithely approach.

There was no mistaking that the SDF unit observing the lake had become caught up in the incident. Hisano had to be acting in concert with them.

So, too, had Nagisa Akatsuki been caught in the middle. And so, too, had Yui Haba.

“Yui...!”

Shio’s frail murmur echoed into the mist and vanished.

Gajou’s expression remained blank as he continued glaring at the lake without a word.

6

Asagi Aiba and Lydianne Didier were flying at about three thousand meters over the Tangiwa Mountains. They were inside Pandion—a tilt-rotor cargo plane from Didier Heavy Industries.

Pursued by the Island Guard, they had more or less fled from Itogami Island only the afternoon of the day before. Arriving at the mainland afterward, Asagi and Lydianne spent the night hidden in a Didier Heavy Industries warehouse located in Yokohama, stocking up on weapons, ammunition, and fuel in the meantime.

Then, fully prepared for what may come, they headed for Kannawa Lake to search for the missing Nagisa Akatsuki.

It was quite a ruckus for so early after New Year’s Day.

At first, Asagi had only meant to help with a little light info gathering. She’d never dreamed that it would evolve into such a major incident.

However, her circumstances changed drastically when the Island Guard came after her at the airport.

Apparently, the disappearance of Nagisa Akatsuki involved crucial secrets at the national level. The fact Asagi had searched for Nagisa meant she had already become involved. At that rate, worst case, she’d be handcuffed and sent to rot in jail, no questions asked. Asagi needed a leg up on resolving the incident; she couldn’t return to Itogami Island until she had information she could use as a bargaining chip to strike a deal with the government.

Why is this happening to me? she bemoaned, but the search for Nagisa came first. At any rate, she needed to get her hands on information. Nagisa was her only lead.

“Very good. The docking of the multi-seat unit for Hizamaru is complete.”

Heedless of Asagi’s anguish, Lydianne frolicked about the cramped cargo hold with a miniature console for fine-tuning machines. Asagi estimated her age at twelve years old, give or take. She was a foreign girl with bright red hair.

Her favorite mount, a red micro-robot tank, had just received a major overhaul, and its appearance had significantly changed. Much of its equipment had been swapped and was now geared for open-field warfare, not urban combat...and a copilot’s seat had been added so that Asagi could ride in it.

The charming, rounded look remained the same, but various modifications made it appear somewhat humorous, like a cartoon mascot from a slapstick comedy outfitted with instruments of war.

For her part, Lydianne seemed quite satisfied, even under the forced circumstances.

“The energy pack upgrade gives it a dramatic boost to operating time, and the firepower hath been greatly, greatly enhanced. Also, to make up for the loss of agility, side thrusters were added, but I knoweth not how well they shall perform.”

“That’s all fine, Tanker. It’s just... Can’t you do something about this outfit...?”

Asagi glared at Lydianne, hiding her chest as she put on the pilot suit that had been arranged for her.

It was a protective suit just like Lydianne’s, skintight and designed like a competition swimsuit. On top of dramatically playing up her body lines, the word box sewn onto the chest had ASAGI AIBA written on it in black marker. It came complete with gloves that reached her upper arms and tights that covered everything down from her hips. When combined with Asagi’s own showy hairstyle, it made her painfully look like she was wearing a costume.

However, the girl called Tanker tilted her head, blinking with a questioning look that seemed to say *I really don’t understand what the problem is.*

“It doth suit you, Lady Empress.”

“Umm, whether I look good in it or not isn’t the issue here...!”

“Nevertheless, it is a cutting-edge pilot suit, Didier Heavy Industries’ pride and joy. On top of heavy resistance to water pressure, ballistics, blades, and blunt force trauma, it is also hydrophobic and breathable. What’s more, it is completely machine washable, and even effective as an antibacterial deodorant.”

“No matter how you look at it, it still looks like a school swimsuit. What kind of interests do the engineers in your corporation have anyway...?”

Asagi slumped against the armor of the tank.

Certainly, it was dangerous to wear a loose outfit in the cramped confines of the robot tank’s cockpit—it wasn’t like she didn’t understand that logic. If someone explained writing the name in the space on the chest as a way to identify casualties in the event of an unfortunate incident, she couldn’t strongly object to that, either.

“More importantly, Lady Empress, it is finally time to embark Hizamaru. We shall soon reach the projected landing point,” Lydianne said as she entered the robot tank.

The tilt-rotor cargo plane Pandion was an AI-controlled unmanned aircraft. Lydianne was setting the flight altitude, direction, and everything else via her robot tank.

Lydianne’s sudden announcement of their destination took Asagi by surprise.



“Projected landing point? What the heck? Don’t tell me you’re going to land all of a sudden?”

“This plane is a tilt-rotor, so it is indeed capable of a vertical landing. It is better to land and search there to obtain detailed information rather than gaze from afar in the sky, is it not?”

“Well, that might be the case, but...”

Asagi sank into thought, bewildered. Certainly, if they were serious about searching for Nagisa’s whereabouts then they would have to land at some point...

“But the area around Kannawa Lake is sealed off by the Self-Defense Forces, isn’t it? Can we really just land without a care? They’re not going to shoot us down, are they?”

“Ha-ha, ye need not be concerned. Spare not the slightest bit of concern for an attack helicopter or two. I shall make a spectacle of striking them down.”

“No, you won’t!! If you shoot down SDF aircrafts, then what?!” Asagi shouted. “Are you trying to start a war?!”

However, Lydianne had closed the hatch long before. Asagi could do nothing but slip into the copilot’s seat.

The multi-seat unit of the robot tank Hizamaru was a simple piece of add-on gear. The two pilot seats were completely independent, and no communication was possible between them without use of a transmitter. It had its inconveniences, but it wasn’t a bad setup when considering privacy concerns.

The seat was cramped and surrounded by electronic devices on four sides, but once she was completely settled in, it was surprisingly comfortable. Thanks to the inside of the cockpit hatch doubling as an external monitor, it didn’t feel especially claustrophobic.

But all of a sudden, the entire giant monitor displayed a badly sewn mascot character in CG, and even Asagi was taken by surprise. The AI avatar, which could be called Asagi’s partner, spoke to her at a painfully loud volume.

“It’s me, li’l miss. You can hear me, right?”

“Mogwai?! What are you doing here, out of the blue?! And your voice is too loud! It’s annoying!”

Asagi struggled with the unfamiliar control panel as she lowered the voice-chat volume. Mogwai paid no heed to Asagi’s suffering as he continued the conversation on his own.

“Sheesh, I finally got through to you. Not being able to use your cell phone is a huge inconvenience.”

“Well, I’m on the run, so it can’t be helped. More importantly, what did you want?”

“Mm, ahhh... I wasn’t sure I should convey this info to you, but it looks like a bunch of things have gotten troublesome, so I thought I’d better tell you now, just in case—”

“Wha—? You’re creeping me out. If you’re going to say it, just say it already!” Asagi, irritated, shot back.

Mogwai put both hands together in front of his own head as he said, “Sorry. I’ve lost that Kojou guy’s location data.”

“Huh? The heck? You mean Kojou’s gone missing?”

“Well, that about sums it up.”

Asagi’s hand stopped controlling the electronic devices as she glared at Mogwai. *First the little sister goes missing, then the big brother? What’s with those siblings?* she grumbled internally.

“What about Himeragi? Wasn’t she with Kojou?”

“The spear-using li’l lady is missing, too. Apparently, they fought an enemy using some weird sorcery, and all the surveillance cameras in the area were wiped out. The only things remaining are leftovers from some pretty spectacular fighting.”

“Wait a... What do you mean, fighting?! Kojou has my spare phone, doesn’t he?!”

“Er, about that... He kinda fell into the sea... He’s been out of range ever since.”

“Fell into the sea...?!”

This time, Asagi gawked. Itogami Island was an artificial isle floating in the Pacific Ocean. The surrounding waters were quite deep, and the currents were rather swift. It wasn't that different from being cast right into the middle of the sea.

Kojou might be an immortal vampire, but that's bad even for him, she thought. Besides, Kojou was a lousy swimmer.

“And what do you mean, fought an enemy...? Why was someone targeting Kojou...?!”

“Ahh, that's probably beca—”

A moment after Mogwai tried to say something, his CG display was suddenly scrambled. The fuselage of the Pandion shook heavily from some kind of impact driving it upward, cutting off Mogwai's transmission.

“What is it this time?! What happened, Tanker?!” Asagi shouted into the internal radio.

In far too light a tone, Lydianne replied, *“It seems we are under enemy attack.”*

“E-enemy attack...?! Don't tell me we really are fighting SDF aircrafts?!”

“No. I shall send thee the external camera feed.”

Before Lydianne had even finished speaking, she transferred the tilt-rotor aircraft's external video feed to the copilot seat monitor. The image displayed was apparently the landscape of Kannawa Lake.

“The lake...is frozen...?” Asagi murmured, at a loss.

It was a beautiful, artificial lake surrounded by mountains.

However, there were jagged protrusions on the frozen white surface of the lake resembling a glacier. The entire dam was frozen over. A white mist, created by the extremely cold air, was shrouding the entire lake area.

No matter what, there was no way it was a natural phenomenon. It was a large-scale sorcerous disaster.

The sudden constriction of the air had sent the air currents fiercely askew. The fuselage of the Pandion was unstable as it continued to turn. Electrical faults were occurring as well, apparently the result of the demonic energy-infused mist. That was probably what had cut off Mogwai's transmission.

"Continuing to gather data while evacuating the area! Emergency power to the engines—!"

For once, Lydianne spoke with a nervous tone. Her judgment was exceedingly sound. Not knowing the cause of the phenomenon, it was a poor plan to loiter in that airspace.

But before the fuselage could actually gain altitude, there was a ferocious, discordant sound of metal ripping that echoed throughout the cargo hold.

"I have been bested...!"

"H-huh?!"

"The enemy has us in its clutches...!"

"Enemy, you mean...? No way...!"

The outer wall of the cargo hold was being gnawed away by the maws of the steel-colored, hornet-like creatures that had appeared. These creatures, flying with giant, dragon-like wings, had apparently attacked the Pandion.

"I can find no matching data upon the Net... That would make them a new genus of demon beast..."

Lydianne stated this in an oddly calm tone. She apparently had enough mental composure to use the images of the demon beasts to run a search. However, even during that time, the creatures continued their assault. The shaking of the fuselage of the Pandion continued to worsen, and Asagi felt like they were gradually losing altitude.

"Don't tell me the Self-Defense Forces were surrounding the place to keep a lid on those demon beasts...?"

Asagi exclaimed as she remembered the closure of the roads and highways in the area around Kannawa Lake.

Certainly, it was natural for the Self-Defense Forces to deploy if such savage

demon beasts had appeared. She thought restricting information was unavoidable so as to avert panic in the surrounding populace.

The problem being: Just how was Nagisa Akatsuki involved in this disturbance...?

“Engine output lost. Hydraulic lines severed. Control unrecoverable. At this rate, a crash landing is unavoidable, ’tis it not...?”

“C-crash...?!”

A cold sweat broke out from Asagi’s back as she heard a roar and the sound of swirling wind. The rear cargo hatch of the Pandion had let out a discordant sound as it was forced open. Lydianne had opened it by remote control.

The wires holding Hizamaru in place came loose. One by one, the robot tank’s docking clamps let go as well.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing, Tanker?!”

“I am conducting an airdrop.”

“What?! Airdrop... You mean we’re jumping out of the plane?!”

Asagi’s eyes bulged as she looked at the cockpit’s instruments. Even if they were on their way to a crash landing, they were still over a thousand meters from the ground. The terrain was a string of treacherous mountains covered by forest, with not a single safe landing spot in sight. In the first place, airdropping a tank wasn’t something you did unless the tank was unmanned. No matter how much a parachute diminished the speed, the impact from landing while locked inside a mass of steel was nothing to laugh at.

“Preparations are in order. Hizamaru is equipped with an air cushion for just such an eventuality. It has yet to undergo a live test, but theoretically, there shall be no problem whatsoever,” Lydianne stated in a tone full of baseless confidence.

Asagi went pale as she vigorously shook her head, whipping her hair around, and said, “There’s a big problem!! We’re gonna die! We’re gonna die, for sure...!!”

“’Tis through risking the self that one finds opportunity. Let us be off, Lady

Empress!”

In time with Lydianne’s declaration, there was a *ka-thunk!* sound as the final docking clamp could be heard releasing its load. Asagi was struck by the unpleasant feeling of weightlessness as the robot tank slid out of the cargo hold...

...And into midair, not a single foothold for the next thousand meters of altitude—

“You’re...kidding me...”

The robot tank was assaulted by a thick wall of heavy wind resistance. The machine was buffeted by the impacts, leaving even Asagi unable to let out a cry.

The tilt-rotor cargo plane under attack from the steel-colored creatures exploded above Asagi’s and Lydianne’s heads.

The robot tank was showered by flying fragments and blast winds as it fell.

“N...nooooooooooooo—!”

Asagi’s shriek was swallowed up by the azure sky and vanished.

Beneath the girls, the surface shrouded in pure-white mist cruelly waited to greet them.

Intermission i

Somehow, the scent took him back—the scent of tatami with a hint of grass.

It was a wide, Japanese-style room with a futon spread over the mat. This was where Kojou Akatsuki awoke at last.

The light shining through a paper sliding door softly illuminated his half-waking vision.

“This is...?”

Lying faceup, Kojou absentmindedly looked around at the furnishings of the unfamiliar room.

It was a fairly weathered building. The wood of the pillars and rafters had yellowed from the long months and years but gave off a reassuring sense of high quality nonetheless. It was an atmosphere rarely experienced on the man-made isle of Itogami Island.

“I see... We were attacked by the weird chick in the priestess outfit...”

The last thing Kojou could remember was falling after combat on the artificial isle’s beach.

A mysterious woman in priestess attire had attacked them right after they’d escaped Natsuki Minamiya’s pursuit with their lives. The woman used a frightening ability that allowed her to force her way into the normal flow of time. Naturally, she’d pounded not only Kojou, but also Yukina and Kiriha Kisaki, without any of them able to lift a finger.

Resigned to his own destruction, Kojou had summoned a Beast Vassal to escape from her pursuit. The ground beneath their feet had been decimated, and as a result, he, Yukina, and Kiriha had fallen into the sea.

That was the last thing Kojou remembered.

“Right, Himeragi—!”

Remembering that Yukina and Kiriha had been caught up in the attack, Kojou tried to leap to his feet.

But just as he was about to try, Kojou felt a faint resistance on his torso. It was a soft, warm weight, as if some mischievous cat had climbed onto him.

Her soft, sleeping breaths slipped through the futon over Kojou, sinking deeply into his chest.

“H-Himeragi...?!”

Kojou froze. The scene before him was beyond his ability to process.

Yukina Himeragi was snoozing away while cuddled up against Kojou. Her long eyelashes, plush lips, and beautiful face were the same as always, but she seemed even younger than usual, probably because she was sleeping and defenseless.

For some reason, she was wearing a *yukata*, not her usual school uniform. Thanks to being cuddled up to him like that, her outfit covered everything except some of her collar. What leaped into Kojou’s vision were her pale neck and the distinct line of her slender collarbone...and the faint swell of her breasts.

“Why is...Himeragi...with me...on a futon...in a *yukata*...?”

Kojou fell into a panic as the image of Yukina in a *yukata* was burned into his mind. *Calm down*, he told himself, but having her bare flesh so very, very close was robbing Kojou of his capacity for calm, rational thought.

Perhaps Kojou had conveyed that nervousness to her in the meantime, for he felt the sleeping Yukina stir. She sighed, rubbing her cheek against Kojou’s blanket in obvious regret.

“...Mm...m?”

Yukina let out an odd sound like a little animal as she slowly lifted her head. Her expression was hazy, and her vision was unfocused. Perhaps she was still half-asleep. That must have been why she didn’t seem to realize that her *yukata* had slipped, halfway exposing her immaculate shoulder.

“Ah... Good morning, senpai...,” Yukina greeted him upon waking as she

rubbed her eyes like a little girl.

Kojou felt like he was holding a bomb with the safety turned off, staring at the sleepy-eyed girl as he said, “C-calm down, Himeragi... Let’s talk about this...”

“*Haaahnn*,” she yawned.

“L-let’s calmly...assess the situation and—”

“——Senpai?!”

That instant, Yukina’s eyes snapped open—with Kojou in front of her, she loomed over him. *She’s gonna bite my head off*, thought Kojou, his body cringing in fear.

“I’m so glad you’re awake! Are you hurt?! How are your wounds?” she exclaimed.

“Y-yeah...probably...,” Kojou, relieved, replied to Yukina’s earnest expression of concern.

“I’m so glad,” said Yukina, sighing in relief.

Against her back rested a full-metal spear, naked and totally deployed. This was the spear that had been taken from Yukina, the spear Kojou was nearly impaled by. Even if there was nothing she could have done, Yukina might have felt responsible nonetheless.

But ironically, it was thanks to that very same Snowdrift Wolf that they had managed to drive off the girl in the priestess outfit. Yukina’s magic-nullifying spear had rendered her unable to activate her ability to *insert time*. This had allowed Kojou a chance to launch a counterattack.

“.....I see.”

However, before he could tell Yukina as much, a girl with long, dark hair in an old-fashioned hairstyle poked her head out from under the same blanket that covered Kojou. His eyes widened at the sight as if he were watching something out of a horror flick.

“Aaagh!”

“She fell asleep beside you after nursing you through the night... It’s like some

kind of cheap romantic comedy, complete with a *yukata* boob shot. This must be the Fourth Primogenitor's animal magnetism at work. Though it annoys me, I shall take note. Perhaps I should say, that is a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency for you, Yukina Himeragi?"

"Kisaki?! Wh-why are you...*there* of all places...?!"

Kojou posed the question in a halting voice as he gazed, dumbfounded, at Kiriha Kisaki crawling out from his own futon.

Yukina's face was frozen over, her eyebrows distinctly twitching as she muttered, "Senpai...in the same futon as Kisaki... What were you doing...?!"

"You're wrong! I only woke up just now! I don't know anything about this!"

"Yukina Himeragi, straighten your *yukata* already."

"...?!"

When Kiriha bluntly pointed out the situation, Yukina hastily hid her collarbone under her disheveled *yukata*. Yukina mumbled a whining noise to herself, staring resentfully at Kojou enough that he averted his eyes, feeling tempted to turn away from her.

Instead, he spoke to the other girl present. "So you're going to properly explain what the heck's been going on, Kiriha Kisaki?"

"Before I do that, I would like to ask you—how much do you remember, Fourth Primogenitor?"

Kiriha sat up as she posed a question of her own to Kojou. As he suspected, she was also wearing a *yukata*, just like Yukina was. Kojou, finally noticing, realized he was wearing a similar one, but for men.

"...Up to when the chick in the priestess outfit attacked, and it looked like I was gonna get killed. I'm pretty sure she stole Himeragi's spear and came after me with it..."

"I see... Incidentally, how is your right arm? Any problem with it?"

"Problem?" Kojou asked, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

Then he glanced down at his own right hand, whereupon his expression froze.

Yukina strongly bit her lip, her eyes wavering with a look of visible fear.

“Senpai?”

Judging that he could not ignore the issue, Kojou sighed as he murmured, “I can’t...feel my right hand at all.”

“Oh no.” Yukina’s shoulders quivered.

“I thought as much.” Kiriha’s shoulders sank with a knowing expression.

Kojou glared at her, perplexed, as he said, “You knew? About my right hand...?”

“Yes. I allowed it to cradle my bountiful boobs, and yet, you showed no reaction at all.” Kiriha purposefully leaned forward to better accentuate her chest.

“B...boobs... You mean that...?”

Kojou’s gaze unwittingly drifted to Kiriha’s *yukata*. He was dumbfounded at the notion that he’d had a hand plunged into that bewitching valley yet had not noticed a thing.

However, without a hint of shame, Kiriha shrugged her shoulders and said, “I lied.”

“That was a lie?!”

“Your right hand was shredded. After all, you recklessly used your bare hand to stop an activated Schneewaltzer—”

“Oh...really...? Come to think of it, something like that happened once before...”

Kojou forced a feeble smile as he murmured. Yukina remained silent with a neutral expression, perhaps amazed at the lack of tension in Kojou and Kiriha’s exchange.

It was the second time that Snowdrift Wolf, a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, had impaled Kojou. In the previous case, the injury induced a Beast Vassal to run amok, and the wound itself was half-solid, half-insubstantial. For a time, Kojou had been troubled by ill health that was a manifestation of leakage

of his demonic energy. And this time, the symptom was a loss of feeling.

In the first place, recovering from a wound inflicted by Snowdrift Wolf, a purging spear said to be able to destroy even a primogenitor, proved difficult, even with the Fourth Primogenitor's regenerative abilities.

"But, well, I suppose I must...praise your sound judgment in the matter," Kiriha said in a rare consoling tone. "After all, there was no other way to drive off Paper Noise, having your own Beast Vassal attack you included. Though, thanks to that, the two of us nearly drowned to death with you."

"Paper Noise... Wait, you mean the chick in the priestess outfit? She called herself Shizuka, right?" Kojou asked.

Yukina replied meekly, "Yes. She is first among the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency...and one of the mightiest Attack Mages in Japan."

Now that he'd experienced her strength firsthand, he didn't feel very much like laughing off the stupid-sounding title of "mightiest in Japan." If Koyomi Shizuka was a big shot in the Lion King Agency, he could understand her being able to wield Snowdrift Wolf.

"The Bureau of Astrology does not like to acknowledge it, but I must tip my hat to her..." Kiriha shifted into speaking more casually. "She is a monster on par with a vampire primogenitor. I can only say that you did well to drive her off at the cost of only a single arm."

Yukina lowered her eyes in dejection as Kojou stared at his numb right hand.

"I am sorry, senpai... It is because I allowed Snowdrift Wolf to be taken..."

"It's not something you should worry about, Himeragi. You had no way to stop her, right?"

Koyomi Shizuka's attack was over by the time they'd realized anything. It was impossible to block or evade it. Even being on guard was no help. It made no sense to blame Yukina.

"More importantly, I've gotta go look for Nagisa—"

Kojou, annoyed by Kiriha's attempt to cuddle up to him, pushed her away and rose to his feet. Thinking he ought to first check his current location, he walked

to the window and opened the shutters.

Kojou froze like a smartphone hitting an error while turning on.

He stopped sharply because the scene unfolding on the other side of the window was well beyond his expectations.

Mountains, layered and folded together, towered before him, with evergreen trees covering their sharply inclined slopes. The faint white mist hovering in the air was probably steam from hot springs. In the distance, he could make out the snow-covered peak of Mt. Fuji.

It was undeniable; this was picturesque scenery found nowhere on Itogami Island, the artificial isle of eternal summer.

“Where is this...?!”

Kojou and the others had been drowning in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Why had he awakened in the mountains?

Still confused, Kojou looked back as the room’s sliding screen suddenly opened with force. From there, a group of foreign girls dressed in various articles of patterned Japanese clothing poured into the room like an avalanche.

“Room service! Sorry for the wait!”

Wearing a frilly apron over her red, long-sleeved kimono to look like some sort of Japanese maid was a beautiful, glamorous blonde around twenty years old. Kojou remembered her face.

“Tee-hee, we have arrived with your meal.”

An elegant beauty in a blue faux-Japanese maid outfit reverently pressed three fingers of each hand to the floor as she bowed.

“I’ll do my best with the massage!” A girl in a similar outfit but in yellow valiantly clenched a fist as she looked up at Kojou.

“I shall wash your back in the bath...”

“I can throw in little *ecchi* freebies, too...”

Deeply suggestive smiles adorned the faces of the girls in black-and-white maid outfits as they crawled onto Kojou’s futon. Right around that point, Kojou

finally recovered from his shock.

“You girls...! What’s Vattler’s maid brigade doing here...?!” Kojou exclaimed in a shrill voice.

In reality, the girls in the mysterious “maid” outfits were originally the daughters of royals and high officials of the countries neighboring the Warlord’s Empire, granted to Vattler as hostages in exchange for the safety of their mother nations, or so Kojou had heard.

However, Vattler himself had little interest in hostages or women, so he treated the girls as simple guests, letting them live their lives as they pleased—enough that, to be blunt, Kojou wondered if Vattler let them have *too much* freedom.

Kojou could not conceal his surprise at meeting the Oceanus Girls at that juncture. Their appearance before Kojou’s eyes meant that Vattler, Master of Serpents and battle maniac extraordinaire and plenipotentiary, had involved himself in the current incident, namely Nagisa’s disappearance.

Yukina was the one to answer Kojou’s question, though it sounded difficult for her to speak the words.

“Actually... Er, when we were on the verge of drowning, it was the Duke of Ardeal who brought us aboard...”

Kojou’s shoulders slumped forward as he digested the facts. Vattler being in the area and recovering Kojou and the others after they’d tumbled into the sea—now that it had been said out loud, he recognized it as a likely enough story. When Vattler’s appearance was added to the mix, Koyomi Shizuka letting Kojou and the others go so easily made sense, too.

“Then we’re inside Vattler’s ship? And this landscape is some kind of...3-D image, or...”

“No, that is incorrect,” said the girl wearing the red Japanese maid outfit, smiling. “This is a Japanese hot spring hotel, at one of the hot springs in Hakone.”

“H-Hakone...?! What are you all doing in a place like...?!”

“We are on vacation.”

The blue maid narrowed her eyes with delight.

“Through the wise judgment of the Duke of Ardeal, the crew of the *Oceanus Grave II* has been permitted to spend New Year’s Day at a hot spring.”

“O-oh...”

So you’d be here even if you hadn’t brought us, thought Kojou with conflicting feelings. Certainly, he was grateful to have been brought from Itogami Island all the way to the mainland, but to be honest, he was in a bind from being led to a tourist spot.

It would have been better if they’d been tossed out at a suitable harbor, but...

Then, as if peering into Kojou’s thoughts, the other maids chimed in:

“Fourth Primogenitor, please remember that...”

“...Hakone is less than twenty kilometers from Kannawa Lake.”

“It is close enough to reach by foot.”

“...?!”

Kojou stared in shock at the girls, smiling as if they saw right through him.

Apparently, unbeknownst to Kojou and the others, they had been cast into the very epicenter of the incident.



CHAPTER TWO
BATTLEFIELD OF
WHITE MIST

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BATTLEFIELD OF WHITE MIST

1

On the bridge of the airship elegantly dancing in the sky, La Folia Rihavein sullenly pressed a hand against her cheek. She had silver hair and azure eyes—the young princess of Aldegia of Northern Europe, said to be the second coming of Freya.

The affectionate smile that came over her lips was just like the image she projected to the wider world. However, in that instant, it was a faint, fleeting smile, one that somehow seemed frightening.

It was the very elegance of her appearance, combined with the malice oozing from her smiling face, that invited terror.

“How unfortunate. To take a leave of absence and come all the way to Itogami Island only to find Kojou absent...”

So spoke La Folia as she turned a glacial gaze toward her subordinate. The gaze seemed to shoot through the female knight with short silver hair like an arrow, prompting her to hang her head in shame.

That knight was Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina—the agent under La Folia’s command stationed at Itogami Island for the protection of Kanon Kanase and other matters.

“I am very sorry. I, Kataya Justina, shall never live down the shame of having been tardy in my report to my princess. Accordingly, I shall atone for this failure by cutting my belly and—”

“Please don’t. You’ll make a mess of the airship.”



When Justina drew a dagger and spoke with tragic resolve, La Folia coldly rejected her offer.

“B-but, my princess—”

“Your failure is inescapably tied to an unexpected success. In light of this, I shall overlook the matter. It would seem that the world has become a rather interesting place.”

Perhaps teasing Justina had improved her mood, for La Folia seemed to have regained her usual disposition.

The armored airship *Böðvildr* was currently high in the sky over a lake in the mountains. Their altitude was some 2,500 meters off the ground, a position from which they were able to see from the foothills of Mt. Fuji to the Tangiwa mountain range.

The measuring instruments of the Kingdom of Aldegia, which boasted high-quality sorcerous technology, had firmly grasped the existence of a vast source of demonic energy emerging from Kannawa Lake. They had also granted the provisional name of “drones” to the demon-beast swarm also present.

To the bridge crew, La Folia inquired, “Incidentally, have you caught sight of a certain lord?”

It was a young knight sitting in the executive officer’s seat who replied with a tense look.

“He disembarked to act on his own. He stated there was something he wished to investigate.”

“I see... He anticipated this turn of events from the beginning, it would seem...,” La Folia murmured with an inquisitive glint in her eyes.

Justina gasped, seeming to realize something as she lifted her face and said, “Princess, then perhaps the destination Kojou Akatsuki left Itogami Island for...”

“Yes, most likely.” La Folia’s expression was one of amusement. “Can we descend to Kannawa Lake, Captain?”

“That will...likely be rather difficult.”

The captain, with a rugged face like a pirate from older times, greeted the whimsical princess's question with a shake of his head.

"Why not?" she asked, slightly inclining her head with a small pout.

"These drones are not enough to breach the sacred wards of the *Böðvildr*, but it seems something worse lurks within that mist."

The captain pointed to a corner of the long-distance viewing monitor on the bridge. A unit of unknown origin was deployed in open ground amid the mountains some two kilometers removed from Kannawa Lake. They included one large-scale trailer and two armored cars for a total of three vehicles. The number of personnel was small-scale, but the sight of them lurking under the mist somehow felt eerie.

"Who are they? It is not a JSDF unit?"

La Folia touched a hand to her lips, her interest piqued.

The objective of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' unit surrounding Kannawa Lake was undoubtedly to seal the demon beasts that had emerged. With combat having already broken out, there was no reason to keep a small force deployed in ambush like this.

They were clearly separate from the JSDF, belonging to a different, unknown command structure. If anything, they were behaving like enemies.

"I am mindful of just what that trailer is carrying. Have you finished analyzing it, I wonder?" La Folia calmly smiled as she posed the question.

"There's no beating you, princess."

The captain shrugged his shoulders as he ordered a subordinate to switch the screen. The rainbow-colored 3-D image displayed magic-energy density from real-time data analysis.

An unfamiliar silhouette emerged from where the unit of unknown origin was hiding. It was an enormous demon beast reading, its size incomparable to that of the drones.

"Captain, what is this?"

La Folia's eyes glimmered as she beheld the truth behind the soldiers in

ambush.

The captain knit his brows as he replied, "From the silhouette, it appears to be a wyvern."

"Wyvern? That is an especially rare, endangered species, is it not?!" Justina asked in a grave tone.

Wyverns—these were two-legged, winged dragons with a high level of flight ability. They were less a lower species of dragon than demon beasts that merely resembled dragons in appearance, but even so, their wingspans reached forty to fifty meters, and they were a fiendish species, possessing great combat ability.

Wyverns had made their savage might known in the Middle Ages, but environmental destruction leading to reduction in habitat and rapacious hunting had reduced their numbers in recent years to the verge of extinction. In Japan, their only current habitats were the Demon Beast Park of Blue Elysium and a few other similar locations. That made it all the more unfathomable that wild wyverns might have survived living so close to human habitation.

"Mere wyverns are not enough to take on *Böðvildr*. However, their biological wall spells and their demonic-energy makeup is completely different from normal demon beasts. This goes well beyond being 'just' a new genus," said the captain, wary.

"Tee-hee." La Folia giggled. The look on her face was like a kitten excitedly staring at a ball rolling around on the ground.

"So it is an artificially created new genus...or something other than a wyvern. Either way, it is intended for combat...in accordance with a certain lord's expectations, it would seem."

Justina looked up at her liege with a fearful expression. "P-princess?"

The knightly order to which she belonged, serving as La Folia's escorts, endured being flung this way and that by her whims. If something happened to La Folia, the crown princess, Justina slitting her belly would be nowhere near sufficient atonement.

Whether she knew of the female knight's mental anguish or not, the princess

began putting her beloved spell gun in order.

“The Duke of Ardeal’s cruise ship would appear moored in Tokyo Harbor, but the Nation of Neustria’s tilt-rotor aircraft has been sighted over Kannawa Lake airspace, has it not? Naturally, the eyes of various persons from Lotharingia and the Chaos Zone are sparkling as well. Tee-hee... This has become most amusing, Justina.”

“Princess, please... Please exercise prudence...!”

The knight was practically prostrate as she made a fervent plea that echoed throughout the armored airship’s bridge.

The pale-blue fuselage slowly began its descent.

2

Hisano Akatsuki ran across the frozen white embankment of the dam.

Over her shoulder, she was carrying an unconscious, white-haired girl. Shirona Kuraki was completely defenseless during spectral projection, leaving Hisano to defend Shirona’s real body all by herself.

With a roar, one of the houdas attacking them tumbled onto the ground. A string of *naginata* attacks unleashed by Hisano had brought down the silver creature. Even if the person she carried was a petite girl, it was a remarkable feat.

However, Hisano’s expression was grave as she looked down at the houda she had slashed to ribbons. She’d realized that the blade of her *naginata*, its hardness supposedly reinforced with ritual energy, was slightly chipped.

“Too hard... So this is why mere bullets are useless against them...”

With agility unthinkable for an old woman pushing seventy, Hisano climbed over the dam’s frozen gate.

In various places around the mist-enveloped dam, Self-Defense Forces continued to battle the houda swarms. Ordinary rifle rounds were unable to penetrate a houda’s scales; hence, why every unit was waging a difficult battle against the demon beasts. The Special Attack Mages were equipped with high-

agility vehicles intended for reconnaissance as their main striking power—woefully insufficient firepower for taking on the swarms of demon beasts. In terms of fighting strength, they were just barely holding their own, but it was only a matter of time until the encirclement was breached.

Even the scenic parking lot where the field headquarters had been placed was under fierce attack by the houdas. Nearly ten of the steel-colored creatures, each four to five meters in length, were on a rampage.

Without the slightest hesitation, Hisano flung herself in the middle of that demon-beast swarm. Still shouldering the unconscious Shirona, she swung her *naginata*, handling it with incredible ease.

“So it will not hold until the end. Getting old is a terrible thing—”

Right around when Hisano was cutting down the sixth demon beast, the blade of her *naginata* shattered. She could not maintain the supply of ritual energy required for the enchantment, resulting in the blade losing its reinforcement.

“However, it would appear that striking the internal organs is rather effective. If I think of this as fighting monster crabs, I believe I can manage.”

Hisano sent the seventh attacking creature flying with her bare hands. The eyes of the members of the Special Attack Mages went wide as they marveled at Hisano’s overwhelming combat ability.

With the broader number of houda now reduced by half, the Self-Defense Forces had combat capacity to spare. The demon beasts were bathed in concentrated fire from heavy weapons, falling one after another. Seeing for herself that the houda swarm was beginning to disperse, Hisano finally lowered her weapon and headed into the command tent.

When she entered the nearly smashed tent, it was a female SDF officer in camouflaged fatigues who addressed her. “So you made it out safely, High Priest Akatsuki?”

The individual was doubtlessly working as Azama’s aide-de-camp. She had sharp eyes, a neutral expression, and gave off a fairly unapproachable air.

As Hisano set the unconscious Shirona down in a chair, she gave Hisano a perfunctory salute and said:

“I am Special Captain Mikage Okiyama of the First Battalion. As the whereabouts of Major Azama are currently unknown, I have taken acting command of the regiment.”

“...Major Azama has disappeared?”

“Yes. Considering the situation, it is even possible he was killed in action...”

“I see,” said Hisano with a sigh.

The damage from the houdas’ surprise attack in the vicinity of the headquarters was enormous. It would be a failure unlike the capable Azama but, in a situation where the commanding officer might be a casualty, Mikage Okiyama had apparently responded according to standard operating procedure.

“What is the situation?”

“It is not good,” replied Okiyama in a businesslike tone. “The chain of command has fragmented due to the dense mist. Nor can we hope for air support with this level of visibility.”

“Even I did not expect the houda to have such numbers...”

Hisano murmured, her expression grave. Even Kamioda Temple lacked any record of the houda actually appearing. Even to Hisano, the living calamity freed from Avalon was an unknown quantity.

“Our estimates were off, same as yours,” Okiyama replied, calm and rational to the end. “At present, we have a crippling lack of firepower for dispatching such large demon beasts. If we could at least restore cohesion between the various units, we might be able to cope even with the gear on hand, but—”

“Cohesion, you say. If that is the case, I believe we can manage.”

“Eh?”

For the first time, the fully confident demeanor with which Hisano made the statement brought a perplexed look over Okiyama’s face. Thanks to the mist, infused with powerful demonic energy, communication via radio and spellcraft was being obstructed. She did not believe there was any remaining way to communicate with the units scattered across the area around the lake.

Right beside Okiyama, the white-haired girl, finally returning to

consciousness, meekly raised her hand.

“Um... I...I can do it.”

“Lord Kuraki?”

Okiyama looked at Shirona in surprise.

“But how will you relay commands?”

“I will take direct...control...of them...”

Shirona closed her eyes. Her hair, independent of gravity, danced upward without a sound.

From there, invisible spirit threads stretched forth, and it felt like the entirety of Kannawa Lake had been covered in netting. The threads of spiritual energy wove a giant network together through which she was able to take hold of each individual.

The next moment, the movements of the Self-Defense Forces members... changed.

The auto-cannons of the surviving armored units spewed flames. Precise shots penetrated the hounda hiding in the thick mist. She'd used the visual information of other soldiers in the vicinity of the hounda to calculate their exact positions. Similar scenes occurred to and fro within the encirclement.

It was perfect coordination without a single hint of time lag.

Units that had annihilated the enemies before their eyes shifted to protecting units short on fighting strength. The medical unit went in motion to rescue the wounded that had gone missing. Even if radio communication was available, maintaining such tight unit cohesion was no simple task. The will of a single individual, Shirona Kuraki, dominated the entire field of battle. She was like an elite chess player manipulating every pawn on the board.

“So this is...the power of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency...”

Okiyama murmured, looking completely taken aback. This was an ability that could simultaneously command hundreds, even thousands of soldiers at a time. In a sense, given the realities of modern society, the ability was far more frightening than direct combat potential.

Assassination, organized crime, information gathering, controlling politics and commerce—depending on how one used this ability, one could control entire nations. Perhaps she ought to say *as expected of one of the Lion King Agency's Three Saints*. She absolutely could not pass off talk of the so-called mightiest Attack Mages of Japan as a mere empty boast.

“I am sorry, Hisano. I...misread the true nature of Avalon...”

Perhaps the stabilizing of the battlefield had given her room to work with, for Shirona switched to her inner personality.

Shirona Kuraki was a descendant of a clan with great power, heiress to over a millennium's worth of memories and spiritual energy. These women, cursed from the moment of their birth, could be said to be much like the immortal vampires in that regard.

It was the old personality inside Shirona that made a weak laugh at her own expense.

“It was just as that girl...as Yui Haba said. Avalon was not a seal at all. It was using us, draining knowledge from the priestesses we sacrificed to it to judge when the time was nigh...like a plant using insects to carry its pollen.”

“So it was not the sacrifices' spiritual energy it craved, but their knowledge?”

Hisano's eyebrows faintly trembled.

If Shirona's assessment was fact, the Lion King Agency's operation had been flawed from its very conception. And the *thing* inside Avalon had obtained the knowledge of the Twelfth sacrificed to it. That is what had caused the calamity to awaken.

“Captain Okiyama, I will leave this place to you.”

“High Priest Akatsuki, where are you going?”

Okiyama inquired unemotionally as Hisano picked up a spare *naginata*.

Hisano quietly gazed at Kannawa Lake, enveloped by cold air, as she said, “If the legends are true—that the hōda are merely the prelude of the calamity—the next thought is obvious, is it not? Namely, the hōda have a master still lurking at the bottom of the lake.”

“You are saying that...these demon beasts are merely parasites lurking in the true calamity’s shadow...?”

Okiyama shook her head as if to say *Unbelievable*.

“That is absurd...the only beings that would be served by such numbers of demon beasts would be on the level of a vampire primogenitor...”

“...Which means we are fighting a foe that rivals a vampire primogenitor.”

Hisano casually made the declaration with a pleasant smile. A moment later...

“Aaah...!”

...Shirona fiercely recoiled as she let out a cry. Hisano could sense a backlash of demonic energy. The countless spirit threads Shirona had deployed were beaten away, with the reaction causing her to faint once more.

For one instant alone, an enormous figure was visible amid the cold, white mist.

It was a black, malevolent figure that looked like calamity given form.

Shirona was able to freely control thousands of troops, but put another way, she could be neutralized by an enemy that even thousands of troops could not defeat. The black silhouette crawling within the mist seemed to be just that kind of foe.

“What...is that?”

There was no answer to Okiyama’s question. There was only the calamity’s enormous roar, making even the frigid air shudder...

3

Shio Hikawa was surrounded by pure-white mist as she walked onto the vast, icy plain.

Kannawa Lake was a large body of water, a reservoir of over sixty million cubic tons, but it was completely frozen from shore to shore.

Thanks to the increase in volume from freezing over, the surface of the lake had swelled into a treacherous mountain of ice, which, along with a cold wind

mixed with icy snow, hindered Shio's advance.

Using her little remaining ritual energy to protect herself from the cold, Shio desperately climbed over a swell in the ice, whereupon Shio's ears caught the voice of a middle-aged man that held little sense of tension.

"Hey, Shio—"

"D-do not address me in such a familiar manner!"

Shio shouted, glaring at Gajou as he tagged along like it was the obvious thing to do. What really got under her skin was how the frozen surface of the lake, causing Shio all kinds of grief, seemed to bother Gajou very little.

"Li'l Shio, then. Whatever works, but you really shouldn't push yourself. You don't have much ritual energy left, do you? If another big swarm of those monsters attacks, we'll die. I'm serious."

"That doesn't mean I can just leave Yui out there. And why did you come this far with me anyway?!"

"I'd like you to stop lumping us together like we're partners united by fate or something," Shio grumbled, seriously annoyed.

However, Gajou paid Shio no heed as he said, "Well, I've gotta take care of my daughter. Besides, well, I'd be able to handle most things if it was just me by myself."

"What the...? Are you trying to say I'm holding you back?"

Shio stopped in her tracks, surprisingly annoyed.

Gajou smiled and shook his head as he put a hand into his coat and said, "I'm not sayin' that exactly. I'm saying to pick your time and place for being reckless. You can't save anyone if you die first, you know."

"That doesn't mean I can just let Yui be. And why are you coming along with me in the first place?!"

I really would rather you didn't say things along the lines of It's like our fates are intertwined or something, thought Shio, earnestly annoyed.

Nevertheless, Gajou was heedless of Shio's sentiments.

“Well, I have to look after my daughter. Besides, well, I should be able to manage on my own for the most part.”

“What do you mean by *that*? It’s like saying I’m in the way.”

Shio unwittingly halted her feet as something snapped inside her.

Gajou smiled and shook his head, putting a hand inside his coat as he said, “I’m not sayin’ anything like that. It’s just, you need to pick your time and place to be reckless. You can’t save anyone if you run off and die first, right?”

Then, with the single-shot grenade launcher he’d just drawn, he pointed behind Shio’s back and fired. He blew off the head of the steel-colored demon beast lurking under the ice with Shio in its sights. Its head rolled onto its side.

“Sheesh.” A thin trickle of sweat came over Gajou’s brow as he sighed. As he did so, Shio gazed up at him with a teasing look.

“Well, you’re pretty worn out, too, aren’t you? I don’t think that your Death Returnee power is convenient enough that you can use it without a cost.”

“Oh, you really are a sharp one. You’re worried about me, aren’t you?”

“Wh-who’s worried about *you*?!”

“Well, I figure that hag was keeping me isolated in that cell to have firepower on hand because she had some idea what was coming...”

Gajou shamelessly laughed, making that bold declaration as he discarded the grenade launcher.

“So the fact that I’m being allowed to run across the battlefield means that hag is backed against a wall. Risky or not, I have to at least get Nagisa outta here.”

For a moment, the sight of Gajou valiantly smiling captured Shio’s attention. Perhaps that was why her caution eased up for a moment, for Shio’s foot slipped, grandly throwing her off-balance.

“Aaaah!”

“Whoa there.”

Shio was on the verge of slipping down an icy slope into a deep crevice when

Gajou easily picked her up with his right arm alone.

“Whew... You all right, Li'l Shio?”

“I’m all right... I’m all right, so put—me—down...!”

“You’re so light. Have you been eating properly?”

“Sh-shut up! Let me go, you middle-aged lecher!”

“Sheesh... This lake’s frozen down to the lake bed, by the looks of it.”

Gajou languidly exhaled as he gazed down the crevice spread before his eyes. It was an amazingly deep crevice, like the damage left behind after some kind of giant monster crawling out from the depths.

The crevice ran forty or fifty meters straight down, but even so, he couldn’t see the bottom. There was no doubt: Every last drop of water bottled up by Kamioda Dam had been completely frozen. Someone’s magical energy had frozen the entire dam.

“But how...? Nothing short of a primogenitor’s Beast Vassal should be able to do this...”

Shio shuddered and shook her head as it sunk in that she was on-site at an unprecedented sorcerous disaster.

Gajou smiled as if it was someone else’s problem. “A primogenitor’s Beast Vassal, huh. If so, it means *that’s* precisely how.”

“...Gajou Akatsuki?”

Unable to discern the meaning of Gajou’s assertion, Shio peered at the side of his face. However, Gajou remained silent, glaring into the pure-white mist.

“Nagisa...huh?”

Gajou murmured, speaking in a low, guarded voice. When she heard him, Shio noticed, too: A petite figure was calmly crossing the ice, approaching the pair across where the crevice had opened.

“No, not her...”

Gajou, still holding Shio, set her down as he continued to glare at the figure.

The girl approaching them was wearing a white priestess outfit.

Her face was indeed Nagisa Akatsuki's. However, the color of her hair was different. It was pale, blonde hair, changing color with the angle of the light, almost like looking through a prism. The rainbow-colored hair resembled a billowing flame.

"Who are you...?!"

Shio unwittingly let her voice trickle out. The girl in the white priestess attire gazed at Shio with eyes like pale-blue flames. Shio shuddered, her spine freezing from the malevolent demonic energy she sensed from the girl.

That instant, Shio, as an Attack Mage, instinctively realized: It was this girl who had brought about the bizarre freezing phenomenon—

"Looks like you're finally awake, princess."

Gajou spread both arms wide as he addressed her, seemingly to display a lack of hostility. He spoke with the fondness of one greeting an old friend.

"You are..."

The girl in white attire trained her blazing eyes upon Gajou.

"So you remember me, Sleeping Beauty?"

Gajou sent a gentle smile her way.

The girl's rainbow-colored hair swayed as she weakly shook her head.

"Why do you smile?" she asked in a broken voice. "I...have no words with which to atone... Whatever scorn, resentment, or curses you bear toward me, I resign myself to them."

"Don't get me wrong, princess. None of us have a grudge against you. Not me and certainly not Kojou."

Gajou Akatsuki made this statement with strength in his voice. Shio listened with bated breath to the precarious balance of the conversation between the pair, as if walking a tightrope across a pit of spikes.

"Is Nagisa safe?"

When Gajou asked that, a smile trickled onto the girl's lips for the first time. It

was a lovely, fleeting, beautiful smile; the sort meant for someone precious.

“The soul of the gentle priestess is...right here—”

The girl closed her eyes, pressing both hands to her chest.

Then, as if drained of strength, she immediately collapsed.

Shio finally let go of the breath she'd been holding. As the girl's mind dissipated, the powerful, oppressive feeling making Shio cringe thinned in equal measure. The cold hovering in the air around them seemed to soften as well.

“Gajou Akatsuki... Who...was that, just now?”

Shio asked in a hard, tense voice.

Gajou did not reply to Shio's question as he picked up the sleeping Nagisa Akatsuki.

“Sorry, Li'l Shio. Can I trust you to take care of her?”

“I don't mind that at all, but...what do you intend to do?”

Shio knit her brows as she rebutted. Just what did Gajou Akatsuki plan to do that involved leaving behind the daughter he'd finally gotten back? For no discernible reason, her heart was terribly astir.

“I'd like to say I'll look for Yui baby for you in your place, but...can't you feel what's in the air?”

“...In the air?”

When he said it, Shio finally noticed. The air was faintly shuddering. The hard, frozen surface of the lake was swaying in an irregular manner. It was a strange tremor, as if some collection of enormous mass was raging in the distance.

“Is...something there...?!”

For a single moment, Shio saw the shadow of something resembling a pitch-black fortress through a break in the mist.

It had enormously broad wings resembling warped blades. It had four limbs so stout that they made armored vehicles seem delicate. It had a head like a ferocious carnivorous lizard. It had sharp fangs and crimson eyes.

Though it was her first time seeing one with her own eyes, even children knew the name of the greatest of demon beasts.

“No way...”

Shio’s lips twitched and trembled.

With heavy white mist swirling around it, a pitch-black dragon loosed a terrible roar.

4

The pain on her cheeks woke her up. Someone was rudely slapping Asagi’s face. The high-pitched voice of a younger girl continued ringing in her ears.

“Empress! Empress...!”

“Can you stop calling me that already...?!”

With Lydianne’s palm slapping her over and over, Asagi sluggishly lifted her head, glaring at her with tearful eyes.

She was in the copilot seat added to the micro-robot tank. The redheaded girl had opened the scuffed-up armored hatch and was peering at Asagi’s face with a worried expression.

“Empress, are you all right?!”

“No, I am most certainly *not* all right. I hurt all over. It sucks. So much for the air balloon. It almost got both of us killed.”

Asagi let her complaints pour out as she crawled out of the tight copilot seat.

Launching at a thousand meters aboveground, the robot tank had fired its stabilizing boosters as it deployed its four emergency parachutes, lowering their speed of descent as they set down in the Tangiwa Mountains. However, that was all that had gone well.

The initial trouble came from the air currents raging in the mountainous area they were attempting to land in. Incredible crosswinds ripped the parachutes away, sending the tank crashing onto its side, which rendered the air cushion for landing and leg shock absorbers utterly useless.

The fact they were landing on a forested mountain with densely packed trees didn't exactly help. The elasticity of the trees had bounced the robot tank around like a pinball several times, finally ending in a fall to the bottom of a deep gully. That was as far as Asagi remembered.

"No, no, 'twas most unexpected to have landed in a ravine. I shall make a note of revising the watertight construction upward. However, 'twas fortunate we had the high-spec pilot suits, no?"

"Wait, is this designed like a school swimsuit because the tank was *expected* to sink?!" Asagi exclaimed as she looked down at her thoroughly drenched pilot suit, exasperated to the core of her being.

Since they'd fallen into the mountain stream coursing through the bottom of the ravine, the non-waterproof pilot seats were flooded with water. They were saved by the fact the water happened to be shallow; otherwise, they might well have drowned.

But just as Lydianne had boasted, Asagi didn't feel very cold in spite of the water flooding. The fact she'd sustained an impact like that and walked away with only minor scrapes was no doubt thanks to the pilot suit's high levels of water and wind resistance.

That said, they couldn't know how long they would remain safe stuck at the bottom of a ravine like that. The water of the mountain stream was cold—it was the middle of winter, after all—and perhaps it was just her imagination, but she felt like the water level had increased since she had awoken.

"So what now? Is this tank still usable?" Asagi put her disheveled hair in order as she returned to the pilot seat.

They were deep in the mountains in a ravine without even a name, far removed from the main thoroughfare. There were cliffs standing to both the right and left, terrain impossible for human beings to climb without specialized gear. Even if they tried to call for aid, Asagi doubted the signal would reach. If Lydianne's tank wasn't mobile, she and Asagi would immediately join the ranks of the victims.

Though busted in various places from the impact of the fall, the tank's electrical systems seemed to have remained intact. Lydianne switched circuits

and brought up the maintenance console.

“Self-diagnostic in progress. The electrical system is all green. If we cut off the damaged modules, I believe restarting is indeed possible. Rechecking various sensors is required, but that is within the realm of what can be compensated for with software.”

“Okay, I’ll handle that part.”

“My deepest thanks. Then, I shall begin the reboot process forthwith.”

Asagi spread out her own terminal and connected to the robot tank’s sensor systems. As an experimental prototype, it was possible to adjust the software of Lydianne’s Hizamaru in the field without any great difficulty. With Lydianne and Asagi, top programmers in and out of the corporate world, teaming up together, even wholesale rewriting of the operating system wouldn’t take that much time.

“Ohh... Here we go. That’s Tanker for you... She writes such pretty code. Since it’s like this, I can just do the minimum necessary corrections..... If I handle this part with a parallel process, I can use the resources freed up to stuff an auto-adjustment package in here like...so.”

In the blink of an eye, Asagi had isolated the damaged sections of the robot tank; she then proceeded to put together correction programs for each individual section. It was time-consuming, but it was not difficult work for her. Humming, she typed away at the keyboard, and once 80 percent or so of the work was completed...

“Ugh...”

Asagi squirmed, rubbing both legs together as she felt her back shiver. That feeling persisted when Lydianne turned back to her with a look of concern.

“If you must pee, Lady Empress, I believe it is healthier to pee rather than hold it.”

“It’s not that!!” Asagi shouted, her face beet red. “It isn’t that. I’m like, what’s going on— isn’t it getting weirdly cold around here?”

“Now that thou dost mention it, it is odd. The heater is fully operational, and

yet...”

“The water temperature’s dropping below freezing... Geh?!”

When Asagi checked the number on the temperature sensor, she gawked, eyes widening.

Lydianne’s red robot tank had come to a stop in a narrow mountain stream. The surface of the water was beginning to freeze. A powerful cold coursing upstream from Kannawa Lake had finally reached as far as the ravine. White mist was mixing in with the air, causing visibility to progressively worsen.

“Tanker! This is bad. The river’s started to freeze!”

“Understoodeth!”

Lydianne tossed the maintenance console aside and restarted the robot tank.

Thanks to the water flooding, the engine stalled several times along the way, but somehow, she managed to get the main generator restarted. The water’s surface had turned to sherbet by the time the robot tank hoisted itself up, making a crunchy sound as it walked toward the riverbank. The river was freezing faster than Asagi had expected. If she’d noticed any later, she and the tank would have both frozen over.

“Seems like we’d better get the hell out of this ravine, whatever it takes.”

“At thy command. I will use the wires. Empress, please fasten thy seatbelt.”

“It’s going to be all right this time, isn’t it...?”

Asagi slid into the copilot seat and securely fastened her seatbelt. she closed the armored hatch as well. Thanks to the impact of the crash, the hatch was terribly bent, but it was enough to lend her some small comfort.

“Rest thy heart at ease. Hizamaru was originally developed for urban combat. It was designed to climb perpendicularly up tall buildings. It can climb diminutive cliffs like these before breakfast.”

“Not that I can trust a single word you say at this point...”

“...Nnngh?!”

“What now?! What, speak of the devil and...?!”

“Unknown threat identified! ’Tis the demon beasts!”

“Huh...?!”

With haste, Asagi switched to the external camera feed. Silhouettes of the steel-colored demon beasts emerged from within the cloud of pure-white mist—the same demon beasts that had taken out Asagi and Lydianne’s tilt-rotor aircraft. The distance between them was some two hundred meters. The enemy hadn’t noticed Asagi and Lydianne—yet.

“The ones from earlier were still around?!”

“She who striketh first wins! I shall launch a surprise attack!”

Lydianne used the Hizamaru’s remaining rocket booster to force it up from the ground. The hull of the robot tank creaked from the impact of its violent, high-speed landing.

“Start-up confirmed. All weapon locks released, auto-fire control... Ah?!”

“Wait, Tanker! Hold on a sec! Cease fire!”

“...Empress?!”

Lydianne raised a voice of displeasure at Asagi forcing her way into the system, ordering her to cease fire. Asagi understood how Lydianne felt, pouting at her golden opportunity for a surprise attack having gone to waste.

“L-look there! There’s a civilian! If we fire now, we might hit him!”

“Ah...?! Mnnn... Certainly, he seems like a child most out of place.”

You’re a child out of place, too, Asagi retorted in her mind as she enlarged the monitor image. It was a boy of about twelve or thirteen, standing on a worn-down mountain road that wasn’t even paved.

He had beautiful black hair and brown skin. Furthermore, his eyes were gold. She felt a strange majesty from the boy’s appearance that belied his face, which still bore traces of childhood. He looked like a young, highly temperamental lion.

The boy was only several meters from the demon beasts. If they carelessly opened fire with the robot tank’s weapons, he’d be caught in the blast, for sure.

“What’s he doing there all by himself...? Doesn’t look like he’s a mountain climber, either...”

The boy was unarmed. However, he showed no signs of fear. Even as he glared at the demon beasts, his face was composed. Somehow, that felt eerie.

But that didn’t mean they could just abandon him to his fate. Even if it meant them running a fair amount of risk, Asagi felt they ought to get out in front of the boy, challenging the demon beasts to close combat—

Just as Asagi was about to tell Lydianne that, the robot tank’s warning siren sounded. The radar was responding to objects blanketing the sky above.

“Empress, reinforcements cometh!”

“Reinforcements?! There’s other demon beasts, too?!”

“’Twould seem they are allies from the same swarm.”

“Wh...what’s with all these guys...?!”

Asagi felt blood draining from her entire body as she gazed at the enemy swarm displayed by the monitor. Put together, the numbers of flying steel-colored demon beasts numbered nearly twenty. Such numbers were beyond what a single, damaged robot tank could deal with.

However, it was not Asagi and Lydianne at their estimated landing point, but the boy standing there defenseless.

“Don’t tell me...they’re all after that kid...?!”

Asagi gritted her teeth as she was struck by both conflict and righteous indignation. Both Asagi’s desire to save the boy and her fear of death jostled inside her. Suddenly, she heard Lydianne’s voice.

“Empress, forgive me.”

“Huh?! ”

“Boy, we cometh to thine aid! Retreat while we acteth as thine shield!”

Dumbfounded, Asagi was thrust against her seat by sudden acceleration. With a sudden dash, the robot tank hurtled forward to shield the boy from the demon beasts.

“Wha... What are you doing?! Do you even have a plan?! It’s common sense to secure a line of retreat in situations like these! At this rate, we all are going to die for nothing!!”

Gunfire and explosions drowned out Asagi’s rapid-fire, rambling shouts. Lydianne had fired every one of the robot tank’s weapons in an all-out volley.

However, even a barrage of such force did not put a stop to the demon beasts’ momentum. Crushed by the onslaught of demon beasts, the robot tank’s entire hull screamed out. Joints unable to take the strain emitted sparks, and the armor let out disagreeable echoes as it was torn.

“To fall in the line of duty is to die a warrior’s death. ’Tis not a bad way to go.”

“How do you figure that?! From where I sit, it’s definitely the worst!! And in the first place, you’re not a warrior, and neither am I!!”

As the robot tank anguished, its main gun blasted one demon beast out of the sky. However, that was as far as their counterattack went. The pilot seat monitor was buried in alarms from the accumulating damage, and the trusty Fire Control System stopped responding as well.

“Noooooooooooo—!”

Asagi’s scream mixed in with the sounds of ringing alarms.

It was then that, with a *boom*, Asagi’s vision shuddered, as if they’d been sent flying. A second later, blast winds assaulted the robot tank, slamming into it from the side.

A dazzling, golden radiance filled the monitor displaying the front. The beam of light baring its ferocious fangs was actually a giant golden jackal, woven from dense demonic energy.

Its glimmering forelegs transformed into tornadoes, mowing down the steel-colored demon beasts.

“Wh-what the...?”

Asagi gazed at the surreal scene, her eyes widening in amazement.

The swarm of monsters that the state-of-the-art robot tank had been at such pains to fight was dispatched by the golden beast with ease. The radiant,

glimmering beast was, in fact, a vampire's Beast Vassal—a summoned beast from another world using demonic energy to take physical form.

“My, my... You embarrass yourselves, waving around a contraption like that before me. It is far too insolent, you humans.”

The boy served by the golden jackal glared at the robot tank as he spoke. The faint, pained smile coming over his lips was somehow eerie to behold.

“But no matter. Impudent though it was, I praise the spirit with which you attempted to offer yourselves for my benefit.”

With a light wave of his hand, the boy commanded the golden jackal to attack.

By the time Asagi realized what was happening, it was all over. The golden beam raced across the sky, blotting out the swarm of demon beasts, leaving not even fragments of flesh behind.

“A vampire's...Beast Vassal?! And what's that ridiculous power...?!”

Asagi murmured inside the immobile robot tank, dumbfounded.

To Asagi, raised in a Demon Sanctuary from a young age, vampires were not rare beings by themselves. She'd seen numerous Beast Vassals in the flesh with her own eyes. That was why Asagi understood that the Beast Vassal the boy controlled was extraordinary. That golden jackal was clearly a cut above a normal vampire's Beast Vassal.

So far as Asagi knew, the only vampires served by Beast Vassals of this caliber were Dimitrie Vattler, Giada Kukulkan, and Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor.

In other words, the boy possessed power on par with a primogenitor.

“My Lord, you... Your appearance—could it be...the Caucasus's...?”

Crawling out from the tank's hatch, Lydianne's eyes went wide as she stared at the boy. The boy's face grimaced ever so slightly as he looked back at Lydianne and said, “To think there would be someone who knows my face in such a backwater place in the Far East?”

I miscalculated, his exhale seemed to say.

“Caucasus...the Fallen Dynasty...?! Don’t tell me you’re...”

Asagi gasped, lifting her face up. The Caucasus region was ruled by the Fallen Dynasty, the Dominion governing the Middle East. Even in that place, the vampires with power rivaling a primogenitor numbered very few—let alone with the appearance of such a young boy. To Asagi, only a single individual came to mind—

“Indeed, my name is Iblisveil Aziz—a direct descendant of Fallgazer, the Second Primogenitor, ruler of the Eight Northern Provinces. Know this name well.”

In what seemed like a practiced manner, the boy shook his head in exasperation as he introduced himself.

5

“—*Achoo!*”

Yuri Haba woke herself with a sneeze. Cold cut through her entire body like a knife. Lying faceup, she had a thin layer of snow on top of her body.

“I’m...still alive...”

Sneezing once more, Yuri sat up and gingerly surveyed the state of the area around her.

Yuri was at the center of Kannawa Lake—specifically, on the floating altar for the ceremony to seal Avalon.

However, the raft supporting the altar had been splintered apart, and the sacred ropes and offerings spread around the altar had been blown away without a trace. They’d taken a direct hit from the vast demonic energy gushing from inside the lake.

“What was that power...? If it wasn’t for Rosen Chevalier Plus, I would’ve died, for sure.”

Now that she had returned to the world of the living, fear of death made Yuri’s shoulders tremble.

Rosen Chevalier Plus, granted to Yuiri by the Lion King Agency, was an armament that could create an emulated cut in space itself. For but a single second, the cut in space served as an impenetrable bulwark against any kind of attack. It was because that bulwark protected her that Yuiri was unscathed in spite of taking a direct hit from that scale of demonic energy.

The end result demonstrated that Hisano Akatsuki was correct in ordering Yuiri to serve as Nagisa Akatsuki's escort.

"Er... Nagisa?!"

Yui, suddenly snapping back to her senses, was beside herself as she gazed about the altar's remnants.

The physical body of Nagisa Akatsuki lay on the altar as the pivotal key to the ceremony. Naturally, if Yuiri was alive, Nagisa Akatsuki, who Yuiri had shielded, had to be alive as well.

In point of fact, the bed upon which she had lain was still in one piece. In spite of this, Nagisa Akatsuki was nowhere to be seen. She had vanished somewhere during the time Yuiri had been unconscious.

"She's not here?! How?! Where could she have gone...?!"

Unwittingly, Yuiri had tears in her eyes as she searched for any trace of Nagisa.

The area around the altar was a wide, icy plain. The vast demonic energy that had explosively discharged from the bottom of the lake had frozen the man-made lake completely. Thanks to the dense mist, visibility was terrible; even Yuiri's Spirit Sight as a Sword Shaman could not find Nagisa Akatsuki through it.

"R-right, the radio!"

Yui pulled a sturdy radio out from her coat pocket. She'd borrowed it from the Self-Defense Forces before reporting for escort duty at the altar. Though somewhat bewildered by the unfamiliar device, she pressed the switch just as she'd been taught. However, the only thing coursing through the speaker was annoying white noise.

"Why... Why can't I get in touch...?!"

Yui was still standing there helplessly as she murmured in a voice that made it seem as though she was about to fade away.

Mist infused with demonic energy, which covered the surface of the lake, possibly the work of the earlier surge of energy, made her unable to use reconnaissance *shikigami*. Even if that was not the case, Yui was no specialist in long-range control spells. *If only Shio was here at a time like this*, she could not help thinking strongly to herself.

“So cold...”

Yui, exposed to the frigid wind, unwittingly blurted out that frail murmur.

One way or another, in that situation, it wasn't possible for Yui to search for Nagisa Akatsuki by herself. She was chagrined at having been unable to fulfill her duty to protect the girl, but finding Nagisa Akatsuki came before Yui's pride and reputation. It was no doubt best to return to the SDF operational headquarters for the moment and request reinforcements.

Visibility was still awful, but Yui was able to rely on her intuition to discern the direction back to HQ. The fact that the surface of the lake was frozen made the trip much easier. Though it was work to walk over such cold footing, Yui headed to the shore on foot. If she advanced three hundred meters or so forward, land would finally come into view.

To the best of her knowledge, the SDF had a ground unit deployed in reserve on the dam's gently sloped concrete rampart in case of emergency. It was a Special Attack Mage platoon with combat strength of nearly forty people.

However, through the dense mist, Yui was greeted by the sight of wreckage of light-armored vehicles as well as numerous wounded soldiers lying on the ground.

“No way...”

Yui clenched the cuffs of her coat as she let out a whimper. She didn't know the extent of the damage to the unit. However, she could see that it was virtually destroyed. Having desperately walked there in search of reinforcements, Yui took the blow hard. The situation was apparently far worse than she had imagined.

And then—

“Demon beasts?!”

Sensing an odd buzz of wings within the mist, Yuiri hurried into a combat stance.

These were the never-before-seen monsters that had attacked the Self-Defense Forces. The demon beasts were a mix of hornet and serpent encased in steel scales. Perhaps this was the type Shirona and others had called *houda*. One among their number bared its fangs and headed Yuiri’s way.

The aura given off by the snake-hornets somehow felt artificial, different from the demon beasts Yuiri knew of. Thanks to that, Yuiri was slow to react; she had no time to draw Rosen Chevalier Plus from her back.

“—Crouching Thunder!”

Yuri let her right leg loose to kick at the head of the demon beast flying at her with a bizarre sound. It was a mighty blow infused with ritual energy.

But the attack did not penetrate the snake-hornet’s armored shell. Recoil from the blow sent Yuri flying instead.

“So hard...! Then, the sure way to defeat it is from the inside...!”

Somehow regaining her footing, Yuri slipped into the snake-hornet’s flank.

Yuri had a particular junior student float into the back of her mind. Destroying the internal organs was that girl’s combat specialty. Yuri had seen her fleeting, delicate form strike down stout beast men several times before.

Admiring the sight, Yuri redoubled her own special training. This was her first time using it in a real battle, but—

“—Distort!”

Yuri slammed lethal ritual energy into the demon beast, rupturing its interior. The metallic snake-hornet’s huge frame seemed to tremble as its movements came to a stop.

“It worked! I can do this—!”

Yuri used the momentary opening from the demon beast’s halt to draw

Rosen Chevalier Plus.

That instant, the battle was as good as over. No demon beast existed that could withstand the Rosen Chevalier Plus's space-rending attacks. All she had to do was swing the blade down, and there was no doubt the snake-hornet would be cleaved in two.

"...!"

But Yuiri, still on the icy plain, stopped in her tracks.

A new swarm of snake-hornets appeared, almost as if to support their wounded comrade. They bore down on Yuiri, one after another. They probably numbered seven—no, they numbered more than eight. It was as if the entire sky was buried in steel.

"No way... I can't deal with this... I just can't...!"

Naturally, even Yuiri's body froze, fear rendering her unable to move. Any way she looked at it, the numbers were simply too great. There was no mistake: It was this great swarm of demon beasts that had nearly shattered the Special Attack Mage unit on top of the rampart.

"I can't... But...!"

She knew from the earlier skirmish exactly what combat capabilities these demon beasts possessed. Their strength was not off the charts, but they were dangerous enough opponents to give a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency a run for her money. Furthermore, they were attacking in a pack. Even armed with Rosen Chevalier Plus, Yuiri could not cope with such numbers by herself.

That didn't mean Yuiri had the option to cut and run. She couldn't even conceive of the damage the snake-hornets could inflict on ordinary citizens if they broke through the SDF encirclement and reached urban areas.

Before that could happen, she had to whittle down the number of houda then and there to the greatest extent possible.

Yuri steadied her breathing, glaring at the swarm of demon beasts with heroic resolve.

However, it was not Yuiri who assaulted the snake-hornets.

Suddenly, their swarm was sent in disarray. Then, they moved behind Yuiri, seemingly out of fear. They looked like a flock of sheep frightened of a wolf's approach. The demon beasts seemed to be fleeing as they took to the skies.

"Th...they ran away? Why?"

Freed from an excess of tension, Yuiri's strength left her as she wilted on the spot. The cold of the ice was invading her thighs through her tights, but she had no time to worry about that.

Yui was still in that position when she sensed something unexpected moving in the corner of her vision. Looking back was largely subconscious on her part. The instant she did, however, Yuiri was stunned.

"Huh?!"

A lone girl was standing in the cold, pure-white mist.

The girl was even smaller statured than Yuiri. She seemed to be skipping as she came Yuiri's way. An amiable smile came over her face. She was a lovely girl, with long, steel-colored hair that reached as far as her ankles.

And what rocked Yuiri more than any of that was the fact that the girl wasn't wearing a single stitch of clothing. Furthermore, the girl didn't seem to mind.

"Wh...why are you...naked...?!"

Yui pointed at the girl as she posed the question. She did this not out of wariness, but out of an outpouring of concern for the girl.

The long-haired girl stared at Yuiri's face in surprise, blinking her eyes as she adorably tilted her little head.

"Mii?"

".....Mi?"

Yui, beside herself, unwittingly posed that "question" back to her. Seeing Yuiri's reaction, the girl's eyes widened in visible delight. Her eyes, too, were like metal, a beautiful hematite color.

"Right, first of all, put on this coat!!"

Yui stripped off her own coat and put it over the girl's shoulders. It was a

short, sturdy dress coat, but it was a little big for the girl, neatly covering her all the way down to her knees.

“Ohh—”

Apparently, the girl was very fond of the coat warmed by Yuiri’s body heat. She excitedly clenched the cuffs as she happily waved both arms up and down.

“You don’t have any shoes, so I’ll carry you on my back. Get on.”

Yui then turned her back toward the girl. It hurt her to see the girl walking barefoot on top of an icy plain.

“Back...?”

For a while, the girl stared at Yui with a questioning look, as if she didn’t understand the meaning of the word. But she finally figured out what Yui intended, swinging both hands high and leaping onto the middle of Yui’s back with considerable vigor.

“Back!”

“Whoa?! ”

“Back! Back!!”

Wobbling, Yui stood up with the girl on her back. And atop Yui’s back, the girl was merrily making a fuss. She was waving her body all around as Yui wobbled, putting one foot forward after another.

“What’s with this girl...? Shio, save meee...!”

Yui was half in tears as the girl was in an ecstatic mood on her back. Yui dragged her silver-colored long sword along as she headed for the rampart, her initial destination.

On top of the rampart, it was even worse than she’d expected.

The armored vehicles destroyed by the houga were cruelly exposed on their sides. Numerous casualties were lying on the frozen ground, and the air was filled with the scent of gunpowder and blood.

But Yui rested just a little easier, for the medical unit had already arrived. Medics were applying first aid to the troops and were loading the wounded

onto field ambulances.

As Yuiri returned, a woman in a *dougi* approached her. It was an old woman with white hair carrying a *naginata*.

“So you were safe, Yuiri Haba.”

“Miss Hisano!”

When Hisano addressed her in a composed voice, Yuiri bowed with the mystery girl still on her back. “Yui, Yui,” went the girl, making a fuss on her back; Yuiri’s face immediately reddened.

“Um... Miss Hisano, I’m sorry. I lost sight of Nagisa...!”

“I know. You have performed your duty well.”

Hisano gently spoke the words to Yuiri, who felt pangs of guilt. Then Hisano shifted a suspicious gaze to the girl on Yuiri’s back.

“And she is?”

“Er, um... I don’t know. I spotted her just now and brought her here for her protection, but...”

Yui explained in an awkward tone. It was true that she couldn’t just leave the girl out there, but if Hisano told her *This isn’t the time or place*, there wouldn’t be anything she could say in reply.

However, Hisano did not reproach Yuiri in any way. She looked like she was mulling something over as she stared at the girl’s steely eyes. The girl hid behind Yuiri’s back, almost like she was afraid.

“It seems she is rather fond of you, Yuiri Haba.”

“Y-yes. It would seem so. I wonder why...?”

Yui replied thus, feeling like she was at least half-asking herself.

“Hmm.” Hisano sighed. “Yui Haba, I entrust defending the wounded Self-Defense Forces to you. Take that girl with you and retreat as far as Gotemba. This comes from Shirona as well.”

“Retreat?”

Yui-ri echoed the word in bewilderment. Though she was a Sword Shaman belonging to the Lion King Agency, Yui-ri was currently on loan to Kami-oda Temple. If Hisano ordered her to retreat, she had no option but to obey, but...

“But the search for Nagisa...”

“I will handle that,” Hisano sharply rebuked. Then, she stared at Yui-ri with a sober look in her eyes as she said, “More importantly, under no circumstances are you to take your eyes off that girl. I am counting on you.”

“O-of course.”

Yui-ri was still in the dark, but she nodded, overwhelmed by Hisano’s intensity. Even as she did so, the steel-haired girl sitting on Yui-ri’s back cheerfully raised her voice.

“Yui-ri... Yui-ri...”

Intermission ii

“Asagi’s close by...?”

Kojou Akatsuki’s confused voice echoed throughout the steamy bath.

He was in a large hot-spring bath at the high-class hotel in the middle of Mount Hakone. Thanks to Vattler having reserved the entire hotel, Kojou was the only one in the bath. He looked like he was talking to himself, but he was actually speaking to the raggedy mascot character on the screen of a modified, waterproof smartphone—Mogwai.

“Wait, did she come to look for Nagisa...? She didn’t say one word about anything like that, you know?”

“The li’l miss probably wanted to help out on the sly to look good. Heh-heh.” Mogwai laughed in a very humanlike fashion. *“The rest is, well, an issue of pride. Her hacker personality means that if she sees someone hiding something, she wants to uncover it, whatever it takes.”*

“Ah... So that’s it,” Kojou promptly agreed, sensing that the words of Asagi’s AI partner were oddly convincing.

Thanks to the Lion King Agency running on analog and the SDF sealing the place off, even Asagi’s hacking abilities had ended up unable to determine the reason for Nagisa’s disappearance. That had no doubt hurt Asagi’s image of herself. Thus, she had crossed all the way to the mainland to exact her revenge.

“...So where is Asagi now, and what is she doing?” Kojou inquired while soaking in the very broad bath.

Thanks to his own cell phone having been broken during the fight with Paper Noise, the modified smartphone Asagi had loaned to him was Kojou’s only remaining means of long-distance communication. That said, thanks to the majority of its processing power being devoted to Mogwai, he couldn’t really expect it to have much of a normal cell phone’s functionality.

In the middle of the modified smartphone's little screen, the AI avatar grandly shook his head and said, *"I'm not really sure. Since a little while ago, contact with my copy over where the li'l miss is has been cut. I can't merge data with it."*

"Contact's been cut...? Wait, is she actually all right?"

"It's possible she's simply in a place where a signal won't reach, but I am a teeny bit bothered that the cargo airplane the li'l misses were on vanished from radar. They could've just landed, though."

"Just when I think I'll finally get in touch with Nagisa, now Asagi goes missing... Geez, gimme a break..."

Kojou sighed heavily as he covered his eyes with a towel.

It was Mogwai who'd told Kojou that Nagisa had left a message on Kojou's cell phone. Kojou felt that there were ethical issues with an AI checking voicemail messages on someone else's cell phone behind his back, but at any rate, it loaned a helping hand that time around.

As was typical of Nagisa, her message was rapid-fire and overly wordy, making it challenging to understand, but the contents themselves were rather simple.

One, she'd arrived at Kamioda Temple, where Grandma was; had fallen ill; and had been asleep.

Two, thanks to being outside cell phone range, she'd been unable to reach Kojou.

Those were the only important things. The rest was that garbage pickup was a different day due to the New Year's holiday and other trivial messages he couldn't care less about. Yet, in spite of hearing her say she was all right, he didn't feel like that was the end of the matter. Besides, the reason for the Lion King Agency and the SDF to conduct an operation in such secrecy remained a mystery.

All the same, Kojou was able to take his time soaking in the hot bath, his spirit considerably more composed now that it was clear Nagisa was safe and sound.

Incidentally, there was a very practical reason why Kojou and the others

couldn't leave the hotel at that time: Namely, thanks to their uniforms being all sticky from having fallen into the sea, they had nothing to wear while their clothes were being washed. If Kojou had to wait for the clothes to come back from the cleaner's, he might as well take it easy in a hot spring while he had the chance.

"Well, Li'l Miss Asagi is with that other li'l miss in the tank, so we don't need to worry that much, I think. Unless the cargo plane was shot down and they were attacked by demon beasts in the mountains or something, that is."

Heh-heh. Mogwai laughed irresponsibly as he voiced what seemed like an oddly realistic hypothetical.

"Li'l miss in the tank... You mean that Lydianne girl? Are you saying they came to the mainland with the tank and everything?"

Is it all right to drive that thing outside Itogami Island? worried Kojou, even though it wasn't his problem, per se. All the same, Mogwai had a point. He didn't think Asagi and Lydianne would encounter too much peril while riding in an anti-demon robot tank.

"...Well, fine. If Asagi's looking for Nagisa, too, we can link up with her soon enough."

"I s'pose so," Mogwai agreed in a folksy tone. *"So you should enjoy being young in a hot spring while you can, right, Bro?"*

"Enjoy or not, I've almost been in here too long, so it's about time I got out..."

"Heh-heh... Don't play dumb. You're thinking about the women's bath, aren't you? It's protected against intruders with antipersonnel sensors, and the employee corridor has an electronic door lock, but I can deal with those if you'd like."

"Nah. I don't need *that* kind of help."

Without hesitation, Kojou rebuffed Mogwai's corrupt temptations.

"I escaped to the men's bath 'cause I didn't wanna run into the Oceanus Girls, so it'd be pretty sad if I went peeking over there. Besides, I'm pretty sure that's a straight-up crime."

That quintet was putting a lot of effort into seducing Kojou for one reason or another. He couldn't even imagine what would happen to him if those girls saw him blundering into the women's bath.

However, Mogwai stubbornly clung to the subject and said, *"So, Kojou, my Bro, which of them do you like best anyway? Maybe the youngest, that blonde, since you have a little sister complex?"*

"No, I don't!"

When the AI's sarcastic laughter sent Kojou sinking into the hot bath, he heard the door to the large bath open with a rattle. He saw a slender figure surrounded by white mist entering the bath.

"It seems you are having a rather intriguing conversation."

As he looked back, Kojou heard a voice with a hint of laughter thrown in. With his guard completely down, Kojou's heart was in danger of stopping altogether.

"K-Kisaki?! Wh-why are...? Where did you come from...?!"

"Wouldn't any normal person simply use the entrance?"

It was Kiriha Kisaki, wearing nothing but a bath towel, walking his way; a seductive smile was playing on her lips.

"Don't worry. I've already set up an aversion ward. No one will be able to interrupt us."

"That's not what I'm concerned about! What did you come for?!"

"Why, I thought I'd enter the bath with you. A naked date, as they say?"

"No, that's—that's not right!"

Even though, in his mind, he knew she was just teasing him, Kojou was seriously flustered. He didn't know what Kiriha's motives were, but it was really bizarre. For as long as he could remember, she was never the type to flaunt her own body like this, but...

"Not to worry, I shall only remove my towel once I am submerged in the bath, as proper hot spring manners require."

"If you're gonna talk manners, don't barge into the men's bath in the first

place!!”

“Peekaboo!”

As Kojou glared at her, Kiriha looked back at him with visible delight as she pulled up the hem of her bath towel. Kojou choked on air as he stared at her thighs, exposed up to the hips.

“I must admit, however, this is quite embarrassing.”

Kiriha’s cheeks reddened as she made a pained smile, at least somewhat aware that she’d gone too far.

With a tired expression, Kojou leaned against the edge of the bath as he said:

“Then get out already. You don’t need to force yourself.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll do just that, then... Or will I? Ta-daa!”

Chiming the sound effect from her own lips, Kiriha stripped off the bath towel all at once.

“I-idiot, what are you thinking...?!”

Kojou stiffened as his eyes were glued to Kiriha striking a dramatic, model-like pose. But—

“S...swimsuit?”

Kiriha was wearing a strapless black bikini. Her outfit was even more revealing than regular underwear, but strangely, it didn’t seem indecent in the slightest.

“I borrowed it from the girls from before. Disappointed? You’re disappointed, aren’t you?”

“No... And that might be all right for you, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m naked..... Hey, don’t look!”

Kiriha boldly strode into the bath and sat down beside Kojou. When her gaze wandered toward Kojou’s lower body, he hastily obstructed her view.

Kiriha made a sigh of apparent pity as she observed Kojou’s movements. “It would seem you have not regained feeling in your right hand yet.”

“...Mm.”

Kojou clicked his tongue, his shoulders sinking at Kiriha's casual observation.

At a glance, Kojou's right hand seemed healed, but he still didn't have any feeling past the wrist. There was an odd scar left from the inside of his palm to the back of his hand that resembled some kind of magic symbol.

"A ritual to generate a ward...likely Paper Noise's doing. She meant to use the Schneewaltzer's Divine Oscillation Effect to place you under a seal...rather than destroy you then and there, that is to say."

"Sealing me...? Now I get it."

Kojou touched the scar carved into his right hand as he listened to Kiriha's explanation. He'd managed to limit the damage to his right hand this time around, but in the worst case, Kojou's entire body might have been sealed like that. After all, that was the surest way for Koyomi Shizuka to succeed in her objective: not allowing Kojou to leave Itogami Island.

"So what should I do to break this seal?"

"Who knows? For now, how about you drink my blood and see what happens? I won't tell Yukina." With another pained smile and a blunt reply, Kiriha turned the nape of her slender neck toward Kojou.

Kiriha's facial expression was modest, but Kojou shot her a suspicious glare.

"No, you're lying. You're sooo gonna tell her."

"Oh my... I'm so surprised. How ever did you know?"

"Why you thought I'd trust you is the bigger mystery to me..."

Kojou, eyes wide, gave his exasperated response. Kiriha lowered her eyes, seemingly out of consideration for Kojou.

"But with your right hand like that, it's difficult to have fun on your own at night, isn't it? You are a boy, after all..."

"Oh, shut up!!"

"...Well then, now that we've become closer through light humor, I would like to get to the point..."

"Er, no, we haven't gotten closer, really..."

If anything, I'm recoiling, thought Kojou with a twitch of his cheek. He just couldn't get into a rhythm when talking with Kiriha. But...

"I came to say farewell, Kojou Akatsuki."

"What?"

"I have been called by the Bureau of Astrology to perform my proper duties as a Priestess of the Six Blades."

Kiriha was suddenly speaking in a very sociable voice. Kojou was a little thrown off at the sudden change in her demeanor.

"Duty of a Priestess of the Six Blades, meaning...?"

"Quelling demon beasts."

Kiriha stuck her chest out with pride.

Whereas the Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency were chiefly assigned to battle against demons, Priestesses of the Six Blades—like Kiriha—specialized in the capture and culling of fiendish demon beasts. From Kiriha's perspective, fighting at Kojou's side was highly unusual work.

"We will be backing up the Self-Defense Forces in mopping up the swarm of demon beasts that has emerged in the vicinity of Kannawa Lake. I thought I should tell you this before I go."

"Demon beasts...emerging from Kannawa Lake?"

All warmth vanished from Kojou's voice. On top of Nagisa, they'd lost contact even with Asagi just after she'd arrived near Kannawa Lake.

"*Heh-heh,*" went the synthesized voice coursing over the smartphone's speaker.

"Unfortunately, that is all I can tell you. It would seem that things did not go as the Lion King Agency planned. Or might this be the result they desired, I wonder...?"

Kiriha murmured, seemingly posing that last question to herself.

Then, just as she got up, adorned with droplets of clear, warm water, she said:

"If we both live, let us meet again, Kojou Akatsuki. When that time comes, it

would be nice if we could have an actual date, naked.”

“Wait, Kisasi! What do you mean?! What the heck’s happening at Kannawa L—?”

Just as Kiriha began to depart, Kojou instantly stretched his arms toward her back.

In the very next moment, a new intruder burst through the doorway to the bath.

“Kisasi! What are you doing in the men’s bath?! What is the meaning of this aversion ward?!”

The expression on the face of Yukina Himeragi, dressed in a *yukata*, changed as she rushed into the men’s bath.

She brandished Snowdrift Wolf, which she had likely used to destroy Kiriha’s barrier by force. With a patter, the Oceanus Girls, dressed in pseudo-Japanese maid attire, followed Yukina into the bath.

“H-Himeragi...?!”

Kojou murmured with a raspy voice, frozen with his arms locked around Kiriha.



And of course, Kojou was still naked as the day he was born.

“Eh...?!”

Yukina froze, her eyes going wide as she and Kojou stared at each other in silence.

Kiriha, dressed in a swimsuit, averted her eyes, wearing an expression like it was no big deal. “Kyaaa!” exclaimed the Oceanus Girls, squealing with delight. Then Yukina, still silent, pivoted and turned her back on Kojou.

With quick steps, she returned to the changing room and, as she closed the door, she gave Kojou a sideways glare for only a second as she said:

“It... It is all right... I am your watcher, senpai, so this level of sexual harassment is nothing... I knew you were this kind of person, senpai, so...”

Yukina spoke in an apparent rebuke, scarlet to the tips of her ears as she ran out the door.

“My, my,” Kiriha said. “It seems she is in a fair bit of shock.” She spoke as if it wasn’t any problem of hers as she, too, departed.

Kojou, having let the timing to complain slip through his fingers, was left alone in the bath as he shouted into the sky.

“Why—?!?”

Yelling to no one in particular, Kojou cursed his irrational fate.



CHAPTER THREE
THE KNIGHT OF THE
SINFUL GOD

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THE KNIGHT OF THE SINFUL GOD

1

Iblisveil Aziz, a second-generation, blood descendant of the royal family ruling the Fallen Dynasty of the Middle East, glared at the instant ramen in a white disposable cup.

It seemed he found it difficult to believe that a dish existed that was complete as soon as you poured hot water into it.

“I am supposed to eat this within the container?”

The prince tried to follow Asagi and Lydianne’s example as he separated his chopsticks before gingerly bringing the noodles to his lips. The peculiar scent of the soup had roused suspicion within him, but...

“This is...quite good...”

...his eyes widened in surprise as he slurped a mouthful of noodles.

Though he was a prince, the cheaply seasoned emergency rations packed into the robot tank had agreed with his palate surprisingly well.

“Told you. At high altitudes, the boiling point drops, so the trick to enjoying it is to let it sit until the temperature is just right.”

It was Asagi who spoke those words with a proud look as she dwelled on the finer points of adjusting the water temperature and cooking time.

In contrast, Lydianne said, “Even though I told the chief mechanic over and over that I most prefer miso broth...”

She was mumbling complaints in a small voice as she sipped noodle broth made from a soy base with seafood added in. Asagi quietly made a pained smile at Lydianne acting her age for once when she said, “Come to think of it, are you

all right with garlic, Your Highness? Many people take issue with its pungent aroma, no?”

“Only the weaklings of the Warlord’s Empire. There are few of us in the dynasty who mind. Also, you may address me as Iblis. I mind not.”

“All right, Iblis, how about giving this chocolate a try? And after that, try this juice, too. It’s powdered, though.”

“You may have my bean jelly if thou prefer. The coffee-flavored one comes highly recommended by yours truly.”

Asagi and Lydianne continued butting heads over the emergency rations spread out on the vinyl seat. For a time, Iblisveil gazed at the spectacle as if finding it quite mysterious.

“You said Lydianne and Asagi, did you not...? ...You both appear to be rather... eccentric.”

“Ah? You think?”

Asagi could not conceal her dismay as she looked back at Iblisveil. Unsurprisingly, she couldn’t quite wrap her head around being treated as an eccentric by a vampire prince.

“Just to get this out of the way, I’m not wearing this weird outfit because I want to. This girl just twisted my arm into wearing it...”

“It makes no difference to me what clothing a pair of brats without a shred of sex appeal like you put on.”

“Hngh...?!”

Asagi’s face twitched in response to Iblisveil’s cold words.

Though Iblisveil had the appearance of a child himself, his chronological age surely ran into the centuries. When thinking of it like that, his treating Asagi and Lydianne as anything but little children seemed too great a stretch.

“However, there are few who address me without fear or favor.” The prince continued, somehow seeming at a loss. “That said, I do not believe you have learned such sorcery that you might be able to oppose me. I am mildly interested in just what your intentions might be.”

“I’m not really...sure what you’re trying to say, but...” Asagi inclined her head a little as she spoke. “If you have no intention of hurting us, there’s no reason to be afraid of you, is there?”

“Even though I am a vampire, and a direct descendant of a primogenitor, at that?”

Something about that seemed to disagree with Iblisveil as he turned his golden eyes toward Asagi.

“Ahh, that’s what you mean,” said Asagi, shrugging her shoulders as she continued. “Well, I was raised on Itogami Island, so...”

“I see... So you are a human from a demon sanctuary.”

This time it was the prince’s turn to understand.

“Ohh,” went Asagi, displaying her interest in Iblisveil’s reaction. “You know about Itogami Island?”

“I had visited it once previously. This time, I merely passed through the airport.”

“Oh, okay,” said Asagi, seeming a little pleased as she nodded. Itogami Island’s central airport was the only place inside Japan from which you could fly nonstop to a demonic Dominion. Naturally, he’d arrived from the Fallen Dynasty by air, entering Japan via Itogami Island.

“I guess I could say, I’ve had normal contact with vampires since I was a little girl, so why should I be afraid now? After all, there’s a lot of good and bad people out there, humans and demons alike.”

“I grant thee, ’tis the first time I am meeting a prince, but I have lived near royals, primogenitors, and the like for some time,” Lydianne agreed, having apparently lived on Itogami Island for a long time herself.

“Goodness,” said Asagi, clicking her tongue. “Ah, right. Iblis, if you came through Itogami Island, are you heading home the same way?”

“I may well be... But what of it?”

Asagi’s sudden question put a curious look on Iblisveil’s face. Seeing it, Asagi glared at Iblisveil with renewed vigor as she said:

“Then, coming to Fighting Ramen at the international border terminal might be worth your while. Itogami Ramen’s thick back fat ramen has its fans, though. Lately, instant stuff is pretty nice, but still, with real ramen, you’re getting the good stuff.” As Asagi began earnestly mulling the issue, she added, “No, wait, Pacific Ramen’s another option.”

Iblisveil continued gazing at her in amazement, his brows still knit as he said, “You are indeed an eccentric.”

Finally, able to restrain himself no longer, the prince of the Fallen Dynasty broke into laughter. He had a cheerful, smiling face, which, if seen by his usual subordinates, would have induced abject panic.

Of course, Asagi had no way of knowing such a thing.

“Er, did I lose you somewhere...?”

Asagi twisted her lips in visible dismay, annoyed as Iblisveil continued laughing and laughing.

2

“Hey, what was with those demon beasts from before anyway?”

Shio Hikawa was standing still in the middle of an icy plain when she posed her question to Gajou Akatsuki.

A Shamanic War Dancer in the field asking Gajou, nothing more than a civilian, for aid was a failure in its own right, but she felt it wasn’t the time to worry about how it looked.

“Demon beasts...huh? If they really are demon beasts, great, but...”

However, Gajou had an abnormally pensive look as he replied. That he, with such an air of composure and mystery about him, had such a hesitant reaction only served to worry Shio all the more.

Shio felt annoyance tinged with resentment at that fact as she asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, this area might’ve been some kind of ruin. The old hag’s words about calamity being buried down here might have been right, after all.”

“Calamity... Could you mean the dragon from earlier...?”

Shio lowered her voice as she recalled the pitch-black shadow in the mist that she’d only see for a second.

Though Shio was an Attack Mage, a genuine dragon was uncharted territory for her. It was said that they were already on the verge of extinction, with only a tiny handful remaining in the Chaos Zone and Africa, but she didn’t know if it was true. It was said that the species, said to achieve greater intellect than human beings over the course of their long lives, occupied a place at the upper extremity of demons and demon beasts. They were known to possess incredible combat capabilities rivaling that of Old Guard vampires.

If a dragon truly had appeared in Kamiyoda District, she didn’t think the Lion King Organization and the Self-Defense Forces’ encirclement were enough to fend it off. Certainly, *calamity* was a fitting moniker.

However, in response to Shio’s murmur, Gajou bluntly shook his head.

“Nah, I’m pretty sure you’re wrong about that.”

“Excuse me?”

“Dragons are *guardians*, y’see.”

“Guardians...?”

Gajou’s vague, evasive words made Shio turn a perplexed gaze toward him. As she did, he turned straight toward her, giving her the same fishy smile he always did.

“Anyway, we’d best pull back for now. Either way, quelling demon beasts ain’t a specialty of either of us.”

“I suppose you’re... Yeah...”

Shio accepted Gajou’s suggestion with good grace—not because she bought his ambiguous explanation, but because the unconscious Nagisa Akatsuki’s physical endurance tugged at her mind.

The temperature of the cold air shrouding the surface of the lake was clearly below the freezing point. If she continued her defenseless sleep, she was in danger of hypothermia; worst case, she’d freeze to death.

“The mist is...lifting...?”

Just as Shio and Gajou set out, walking toward the nearest riverbank, Gajou murmured thusly with visible displeasure. Still carrying his sleeping, beloved daughter in his arms, his feet came to a halt as he slowly surveyed the surrounding area.

Certainly, Shio sensed that the mist covering the environs of the lake had thinned out, just as Gajou had said. The landscape was still nothing but white mist in the distance, but they were just barely able to make things out on the opposite shore of the lake. *I don't like this*, Gajou's little snort seemed to say, and he added:

“It's quiet all of a sudden... This ambiance ain't good.”

The self-described archeologist stared at the ice stretching up above them.

The top of the icy hill he stared at was scarred in an irregular manner. The slope was covered with countless diagonal cracks, marred by bits and pieces with metallic coloring. When Shio realized that this was no mere marring, but the remains of demon beasts ripped to shreds, she made a tiny gasp.

“Who...did this...?!”

It wasn't simply one or two demon beast corpses. There were forty or fifty, or perhaps even more—the swarm of steel-colored monsters had been slaughtered in one-sided fashion.

Thanks to being concealed by the mist, she hadn't realized it previously, but in her mind, the surviving demon beasts had likely all been gathered in that place. Then, they had fought someone, perishing to the last.

There was a diminutive figure standing still halfway up the icy slope.

It was a white-haired woman dressed in a *dougi* uniform. Her hands held a drawn *naginata*.

“Lady Hisano?!”

Perhaps she heard Shio's surprised voice, for Hisano slowly turned toward them. Seeing Gajou at Shio's back, she did not seem especially surprised, merely heaving a tired sigh.

“Shio Hikawa... I see you have rescued Nagisa. You have my thanks.”

“Ah, no, I didn’t really do anything...”

When Hisano voiced her thanks to Shio, the latter hastily shook her head. As a matter of fact, Shio had done nothing save take the unconscious Nagisa into her care.

“Heya, old hag. Is this all your doing?”

Gajou posed the question to Hisano in a coarse tone of voice. Hisano coldly looked back at her own son, thrusting her *naginata* before Gajou, apparently to show him the lack of blood spatter upon it.

“Surely you jest. I only discovered what you see here a short time ago.”

“...Doesn’t seem to be the SDF’s work, either.”

So spoke Gajou as he turned over a demon beast corpse with the tip of his shoe.

The wounds left on the steel-colored demon beasts were all from bladed weapons, or perhaps sharp talons or the like. The attacks were unthinkable from the firearm-reliant Self-Defense Forces.

“It kind of looks like they were fighting to protect something...”

Shio seemed to be stating her subconscious thoughts out loud. She felt some kind of firm, unified will behind the annihilated demon beasts’ actions. Like a swarm of bees protecting their queen, they hadn’t once attempted to stop the fight until there were none left standing.

Hisano, silent as she listened to Shio’s words, lifted her face as if she had realized something.

“Gajou...”

He nodded back to her with an anguished expression, not turning his head as he posed a rapid-fire question.

“Shio, you use physical enchant magic, right?”

“...I can, but what of it?”

Shio rebutted in mild annoyance at the instructor-like air with which Gajou

had spoken. However, when Gajou looked back at her, his face had lost all of its previous composure and reserve. He pushed the body of the still-unconscious Nagisa Akatsuki into Shio's arms, practically hurling the girl.

"Take Nagisa and go. Get as far from here as you can."

"Ah?"

Shio felt bewildered as the sun above their heads seemed to darken. A giant, pitch-black shadow was circling above their heads as it descended.

Shio was speechless when she realized what it was.

There was a demon beast above them. A beast far more dangerous and terrifying than mere snake-hornets—

It had a wingspan of forty to fifty meters. It had armor-like scales, and its hind legs were armed with talons like thick blades. It had a long, whiplike tail and a ferocious maw like a carnivorous lizard—

"A w-wyvern...?!"

Dumbfounded, Shio murmured as she looked up at the enormous demon beast descending from the sky.

Once employed as tools of war, a wyvern's combat capabilities were unquestionably the top class of all flying demon beasts. Though not on par with a true dragon, they were in a different league than other demon beasts. Even a Priestess of the Six Blades from the Bureau of Astrology probably could not destroy it alone.

What rocked Shio even further was the knight's saddle resting over the wyvern's back.

Atop the saddle sat a cavalryman with a poised lance—a knight in an iron suit of armor wearing a pitch-black mantle.

"So that's the guy who slaughtered all the demon beasts, huh?"

Gajou spoke as he raised the machine gun he'd pulled out from the Land of the Dead. Boasting high firepower, it was a brutal-looking heavy machine gun for military use, but it felt terribly inadequate against the enormity of the malevolent wyvern before them.

“...Not one of the good guys, I take it?” he asked, glaring at the iron knight.

The grave expression on Hisano’s face remained as she nodded, glancing toward Shio, with Nagisa Akatsuki in the girl’s arms, and said, “No. Having revealed himself here and now, his objective is most likely—”

“The calamity of Kannawa Lake, huh...? Shit, my worst prediction just had to come true!”

The knight of iron went into motion at the same time that Gajou cursed. All at once, he charged at Shio and the others from above, controlling the wyvern as nimbly as his own hands and feet.

“Gajou, I leave the wyvern to you. I shall deal with the rider—”

“Hey, don’t push it, you’re no spring chicken!”

Hisano and Gajou readied and unleashed their respective weapons.

Gajou’s heavy machine gun roared and spewed flames to intercept the approaching wyvern. The machine gun was loaded with anti-demon, electrum-tipped bullets. However, the rounds that had penetrated the hound scales with ease did nothing against the gunmetal wyvern.

For her part, Hisano unleashed offensive *shikigami* toward the iron knight.

Silver birds of prey resembling peregrine falcons attacked the knight with the velocity of speeding bullets. It was such an impressive offensive *shikigami* that it made Shio, a specialist in ritual magic, get chills just from watching.

But Hisano’s *shikigami*, numbering over a dozen, shattered and dissipated the instant they struck the knight of iron.

He had neither blocked them nor struck them down. The *shikigami* had been completely nullified and had simply ceased to be.

“What the...?! What’s going on?!”

Bewildered, Shio stared at the sight of Gajou and Hisano’s difficult battle.

However resilient it might be, Shio didn’t think electrum-tipped bullets would just bounce off a wyvern, a mere living creature, leaving it unscathed. A mere human nullifying Hisano’s *shikigami* without the use of sorcery was even less

likely.

Somehow, the resilience of knight and steed alike was uncanny...and unnatural. Furthermore, neither Gajou nor Hisano had any way of overcoming that unnatural nature—

Gajou and Hisano both had likely realized that from the beginning. That was why Gajou had told Shio to go. *Run, while we buy as much time as we can...*

“Li’l Shio, run!”

Gajou discarded the machine gun and its melted barrel, raising a new weapon: an anti-materiel rifle. Normally, you’d only fire such a huge firearm from a prone position, but Gajou hip-fired it out of sheer stubbornness.

The round, accurately striking right between the wyvern’s eyes, scattered and exploded with incredible magical energy. He had fired a spell gun round: special, precious, and densely packed with magical energy.

The wyvern recoiled greatly, its movements coming to a halt, but this, too, lasted for a mere second. Seeing that it was largely unharmed, Gajou gloomily shook his head, howling with laughter at his own expense.

“A spell gun round...didn’t work...?!”

The unbelievable sight before Shio caused her to unwittingly stop in her tracks.

A moment later, the *naginata* swung down by Hisano made a metallic, high-pitched creak as it shattered. Hisano, so skilled that the Special Attack Mages employed her as an instructor, was being utterly dominated in combat. It was not that she was weak. Hisano’s attacks were being completely thwarted by the iron knight’s armaments.

“Lady Hisano?!”

Shio could not help but let out a cry at the sight of blood spurting from Hisano. Shio laid Nagisa Akatsuki upon the surface of the frozen lake and lifted up her silver recurve bow.

“—Certify request! Freikugel Plus Proto Three—unlock!”

“Shio, don’t!”

Gajou, covered in blood, shouted at Shio. However, Shio ignored his warning. Under the circumstances present, only Freikugel Plus had any hope of saving Gajou and Hisano. This cutting-edge area suppression weapon, the pride of the Lion King Agency, ought to have been able to annihilate even a wyvern with a single blow—

“I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee! Let there be light—!”

Shio poured in the last of her ritual energy and unleashed a maximum power attack.

The spell arrow she had nocked let out a whistle, tracing a high-density magic circle beyond human limits. This generated an enormous, magical cannonball with vast magical energy rivaling vampiric Beast Vassals.

The iron knight took the blazing beam on his own mantle.

The knight’s mantle ate away at thin air like ink on the surface of water, changing into a pitch-black aura lacking any thickness that enveloped Shio’s attack.

Then Shio’s ritual spell cannon attack was swallowed up by the darkness and vanished.

Without a sound, vast magical energy that could burn even a wyvern to a crisp in a single blow...disappeared.

It was almost as if the attack had never existed in the first place—

“N...no way...”

Shio was still in her shooting follow-through as her entire body cringed.

The knight of iron calmly looked back in Shio’s direction. Without a sound, the flying wyvern swooped toward her.

The knight aimed the tip of the lance toward Shio’s heart. Even so, Shio did not move. She’d unleashed ritual energy beyond her limits. Her entire body was completely drained of spiritual strength.

Shio’s eyes watched the glimmering lance approach her heart in slow motion.

Thud! went the dull impact.

Shio's face twisted in sharp pain as she was knocked onto the icy plain from behind.

Warm, fresh blood fell onto her cheek.

It was not Shio's blood that had been shed. Shio was not wounded.....for someone had shielded her—and was impaled by the lance in her place.

With an impudent smile, the stubble-faced middle-aged man fell on top of Shio, drenched in fresh blood.

“Uugh... Aagh...”

Shio's voice trickled out from her throat. Gajou remained motionless, eyes closed. An incredible amount of blood was flowing out of his back. He had shielded Shio, taking the iron knight's attack in her place.

“No... No, this wasn't what I... This can't be happening...”

Shio weakly shook her head. But she, too, already knew the truth: This was her fault. Ignoring Gajou's warning, she'd attacked the knight of iron—and thanks to that, Gajou had been grievously wounded.

It was Shio's reckless act that had put Gajou and Hisano in this position.

As a result, even Nagisa Akatsuki had been exposed to danger—the very girl Gajou was trying to protect, even at the risk of his own life.

In a raspy voice, Gajou said to Shio...

“R...un...Shio... Even if it's just you...!”

Shio made a wordless scream. She truly desired to save him, even if that meant sacrificing her own life. And yet, as she was in that moment, there was nothing Shio could do.

The wyvern's cold eyes gazed down at them from above.

The wyvern's talons, resembling thick scythes, swung downward toward Gajou and Shio as they lay motionless.

It was an instant later that she felt vast demonic energy coursing nearby.

“—Shakala!”

She heard a beautiful voice full of composure and majesty.

Simultaneously, the enormous frame of the gunmetal wyvern was blown away as it sustained a blow backed by incredible demonic energy.

In actuality, this explosive power reminiscent of a natural disaster was a sentient mass of demonic energy taking physical form. It was a vampire’s Beast Vassal with the form of a giant snake.

The blond, blue-eyed vampire who had dragged the summoned beast in from another world stood at Shio’s and Gajou’s side.

“Who...are...?”

Shio looked up at the young man as she asked. However, the vampire noble did not reply.

“Kira, Tobias—you take care of that. At long last, I have found a lead. I must offer suitable hospitality.”

The young aristocrat glared at the iron knight he himself had sent flying as he addressed his subordinates. Then, ignoring him and Shio alike, he approached Nagisa Akatsuki, lying atop the ice.



“Though somewhat sooner than I expected...this is our *third* meeting, yes?”

Saying this, he picked up Nagisa Akatsuki in what somehow seemed like a very casual manner.

3

Around that time, Asagi and Iblisveil were riding Lydianne’s robot tank as it breached Kamioda Temple. The expected SDF checkpoints were nowhere to be found, and the three climbed the long stone stairway to reach the temple grounds.

However, thanks to the demon beast assault, there was no sign of anyone on the devastated grounds. There were signs left over of a fierce battle; it was as if a bomb had gone off.

Asagi and the others had no time to dwell on that, for they heard a loud alarm coming from the tank’s pilot compartments. The instruments installed into the robot tank were warning they had detected demonic energy.

“Master Iblis, that demonic energy just now—”

“Yes. A vampire’s Beast Vassal.”

Iblisveil grimaced as he continued sitting atop the tank’s heavy armor with ease.

The demonic energy had been detected over two kilometers from the temple from the very center of Kannawa Lake. The density of the demonic energy had to be crazy for the tank’s relatively low sensitivity sensor to detect and warn of danger at that range.

“This power, it comes from the Warlord Empire’s Master of Serpents... Damn him, just what is he fighting? Lydianne!”

“As you command!”

Lydianne did as Iblisveil ordered, launching the robot tank forward. The crimson vehicle urgently raced down the mountain slope, barreling toward Kannawa Lake.

Asagi emerged from the copilot seat hatch to gaze ahead with binoculars. The obstructive mist had largely thinned out, so she could see the surface of the lake even from that range.

“I found her! It’s Nagisa!”

Asagi could barely breathe as she shouted against the strong headwinds.

She was near the center of the frozen lake. There was a vampire nobleman wearing a pure-white coat standing against an icy wall, like a cliff jutting out from the lake. He was carrying Nagisa Akatsuki, who was dressed in white priestess attire. She looked like she was still asleep, practically sleeping like the dead.

And at the vampire aristocrat’s feet lay a blood-soaked Gajou Akatsuki and a girl she didn’t know wearing a school uniform.

It had taken less than five minutes for the robot tank to arrive at the center of the lake. The ice made cracking noises as the tank decelerated. Asagi poked her head out of the stopped robot tank, launching a question Vattler’s way.

“Vattler?! What did you do to Nagisa...?!”

With Nagisa in Dimitrie Vattler’s arms, Iblisveil shot him an antagonistic look.

“Nagisa Akatsuki...the Fourth Primogenitor’s little sister?”

Vattler looked back at those intruding upon the scene, laughing sarcastically as he said, “My, my, Your Highness, Iblisveil Aziz... To think the Priestess of Cain would arrive with the likes of you in attendance. This comes as quite a surprise.”

Then he bowed with great courtesy.

“The Priestess of Cain... You cannot mean...?!”

Iblisveil looked at Asagi. Asagi shot a questioning look back at him. The surprised vampire prince could not conceal his shock, clicking his tongue and shaking his head as he said:

“Well, fine. It seems this was fated to be. But I shall have you divulge the details, Vattler!”

“Fate... It would be good if it ended simply as that... Now, then.”

Vattler let Iblisveil’s provocation slide as his gaze shifted toward his own back.

The next moment, there was an explosive roar, and the wall of ice fell away.

As the frozen shards scattered about, an ironclad knight riding a wyvern emerged from within.

Two Beast Vassals—an incandescent bird of prey and a spider spewing threads of magma—encircled their foe, resuming their battle with the man in archaic armor who seemed more than up to the task.

“Vattler... Is that...?”

Iblisveil narrowed his eyes, ferociously baring his fangs as he looked up at the iron knight.

“Yes. An armed operative of the Cleansers.”

“The Knight of Cain, then..... I see, so that is why you stepped to the fore.”

“I suppose it works out that way.”

Vattler casually shrugged his shoulders as Iblisveil began to understand.

The iron knight’s deadly duel with the Beast Vassals was progressively drawing closer to Asagi and the others. Noticing this, Iblisveil leaped off the robot tank and gave a quick order, “Asagi, take those humans with you and withdraw. The safest place for them is likely at your side. He shall do you no harm.”

“R-right... I don’t really get it, but sure! Tanker!”

“At your command!!”

Deftly controlling the robot tank’s manipulator arm, she recovered the wounded Gajou Akatsuki, the girl in the school uniform, and the old woman in the *dougi* uniform.

“Take Nagisa Akatsuki as well. You have no complaints with this, Vattler?”

Iblisveil glared at the young aristocrat from the Warlord’s Empire as he spoke, seemingly to preempt any move on his part.

“Of course not,” Vattler replied, readily handing off the still-sleeping Nagisa to the robot tank’s manipulator. His demeanor was almost surprisingly cool, without a trace of opposition.

The knight and his opponents continued their attacks.

The knight of iron repelled the bird of prey, a mass of incandescent demonic energy, as the wyvern tore loose from the magma threads entwining its entire body. It was clear by that point that the Beast Vassals were being overwhelmed.

“So Kira Voltisvala and Tobias Jagan are being repelled..... It would seem that is no ordinary demon beast. And that armor... It employs the power of the true Nod. Intriguing...”

Iblisveil smiled ferociously as he gazed at Kira and Jagan’s dire straits. The chance encounter with an unexpectedly powerful opponent had kindled his demonic fighting instincts.

“If possible, I would prefer to capture him alive, but...”

Vattler gently chided the prince from the Fallen Dynasty. However, Iblisveil laughed loudly at the young aristocrat’s words of wisdom.

“I’ll let you have the lizard. Let’s have some fun, Vattler.”

A vast, ghastly aura scattered about as Iblisveil spread wings of demonic energy and leaped. He didn’t even bother to summon a Beast Vassal. Iblisveil simply pounded the wyvern with a demonic blow of his own, sending its huge frame crashing down.

The iron knight was thrown from the wyvern’s back, but the tip of his lance was aimed at Iblisveil. The vampire prince’s face twisted in delight.

“You are a witless fool to turn your blade on me! Rip out his entrails, Meretseger!”

Iblisveil summoned his own Beast Vassal—an enormous cobra rivaling the wyvern in size. The wyvern roared in anguish as it came into contact with the fiercely poisonous miasma wrapped around its serpentine body.

No living flesh of a mere demon beast could fend off an attack from a Beast Vassal—a collection of pure demonic energy. By rights, it would hardly have

been strange for the wyvern to perish from the initial blow alone.

Yet, the wyvern endured. Having landed atop the ice, the iron knight deployed his pitch-black mantle, absorbing the Beast Vassal's attack like a skilled matador.

The mantle's hem spread what seemed like an all-consuming void, blocking the approach of Iblisveil's cobra. The aura had no thickness, a thin membrane of nothingness. Even the miasma, able to lead any living creature to its doom through mere touch, could not destroy that wall of void.

It was surely that ability of the knight that had caused Kira and Jagan such difficulty. The bizarre aura he deployed included the effect of annihilating demonic energy unleashed by a Beast Vassal. But.

"Is that all, filthy peon—?!"

Iblisveil laughed deeply, seemingly mocking the knight of iron.

The long, serpentine body of the vampire's Beast Vassal circled around the knight as if to hem it in. The next moment, a sudden change occurred in the very air. The entire space enveloped by the Beast Vassal was tinted a ghastly shade of purple; when the wyvern came into contact with that purple air, it convulsed, seemingly writhing. Its steel scales spewed white steam, as if melting from too high a temperature.

Iblisveil's Beast Vassal had transformed the air itself into a powerfully acidic poison. Even annihilating the demonic energy could not halt the air that had become thick with virulent toxins.

"That cobra... Was Meretseger not the Beast Vassal of Mavia, Second Crown Princess...? Your Highness, you..."

"Did you believe that consuming your brethren was your own exclusive privilege, Master of Serpents?"

In response to Vattler's side glare, Iblisveil continued with venom in his voice.

"Because of the humiliation that damned Zaharias inflicted on me during the Blazing Banquet, I exposed and struck down the traitor who sold me out to that arms merchant. No more than was due!"

“I see...”

Vattler smiled with visible satisfaction as he gazed at the prince of a rival nation that had raised his demonic energy to such impossible heights. He was like a hungry carnivore licking his chops as a feast was laid out before his eyes—

At the height of the incident that brought about the revival of the Fourth Primogenitor, Iblisveil had tasted a humiliating defeat from a surprise attack by three Kaleid Bloods. In the span of less than a year, he had exacted his revenge upon the mastermind of the plot—his own biological sister—and in so doing, had increased his own combat capabilities. This gave Vattler great joy.

“What is wrong, Knight of Cain? Are you done?”

For his part, Iblisveil trained a cold gaze upon the iron knight he had wreathed in crippling poison. Though the iron armor was barely managing to protect him for the moment, it was only a matter of time until its durability was exhausted. Even its bizarre power could not destroy the Beast Vassal’s barrier. That was what everyone thought when, in the next moment...

The knight of iron plunged his lance into the icy plain.

A heavy machine gun for military use lay in that spot. Iblisveil had no way of knowing it, but it had been employed—and discarded—by Gajou Akatsuki. The instant the machine gun was pierced, the contours of the gunmetal lance contorted.

The sharply tipped lance seemed to melt, coursing like jelly as it changed form, transforming into a brutal-looking firearm.

“What...?!”

The unnatural spectacle caused Iblisveil’s face to twitch.

It resembled the transmutation employed by alchemists, but it was of a fundamentally different nature. Alchemists freely manipulated the structure of matter, but they could not copy complex mechanisms operating on principles they did not understand.

In contrast, the composition of the iron knight’s lance had not changed; it had copied the bullet-firing function alone. All it had stolen from the heavy machine

gun was the weapon's "information."

The new gun barrel set into the tip of the lance opened fire with jet-black bullets. These penetrated the barrier of poisonous air, striking Iblisveil's Beast Vassal.

The Beast Vassal recoiled, its movements halting for but a single second. Thus, a gap in the encirclement around the knight was formed—

The injured wyvern took flight. It picked up the knight of iron as it soared high into the sky, escaping beyond the Beast Vassal's barrier with incredible acceleration.

In the blink of an eye, the sight of them shrank as they slipped into the cold, lingering mists and vanished.

"So he ran... No, he retreated in search of a more favorable battleground. Impudent knave."

Iblisveil murmured with pointed annoyance.

The knight of iron had copied the capabilities of a modern-age weapon. Consequently, there were better places to fight than on an icy plain with nothing around him—places with numerous employable weapons where he could fight at an overwhelming advantage. Iblisveil had no way of knowing if he would have been at a disadvantage had the battle been in an urban area from the beginning.

"Can you tail him, Kira?"

Vattler spoke, seemingly, to empty space. Then, silver mist coalesced in that space, and from it, a handsome boy stepped forth. His fingertips had amber threads resembling magma tied around them that stretched high into the sky.

"Rest easy, Your Excellency. I have him."

Kira Lebedev respectfully replied.

Eavesdropping on their exchange, Iblisveil let out a quiet "hmm" before giving a snort of dissatisfaction. "So your goal was to smoke the Cleansers out of their hiding place from the very beginning. What a crafty man you are, Master of Serpents."

“Our Warlord commanded as much, you see.” Vattler shrugged his shoulders with a look of feigned ignorance. “As descendants of our Warlord, it is our earnest desire to see a certain sinful god destroyed. The Holy Grounds Treaty was forged for this purpose.”

“For now, I shall allow myself to believe those words.” Iblisveil met Vattler with an icy stare.

Though their words had an amiable tone, behind them lay an atmosphere of tension flowing between the pair that was as sharp as drawn knives.

It was Asagi, returning aboard the robot tank, who wedged herself into that atmosphere.

“What the heck was with that guy in the black mantle?”

Asagi posed the question to Iblisveil, her demeanor not timid whatsoever. Though she showed Vattler and Kira due respect, she did not show a single shred of fear. Her attitude drained the poison out of the air.

“He comes from the Cleansers...terrorists that worship Cain,” Iblisveil explained.

“Terrorists...? What are people like that doing way out here...?” Asagi tapered her lips, perplexed.

Iblisveil paid her a slightly mischievous smile as he said, “Their objective is to re-create The Cleansing—to destroy all Demonkind and return humanity to its proper place: a world where demons and sorcery do not exist. The key to achieving this objective likely sleeps within this land.”

“Destroy...all demons...?”

Asagi widened her eyes in horror. However, she remained shaken for only a second. Though her face was pale, Asagi raised her brows as she glared right at Iblisveil.

“How can you be so calm about this, Iblis?! If we don’t make them stop now —!”

“Make them stop...? Why would an unrelated human being like you think such a thing?”

A bewildered expression came over Iblisveil. No doubt, in his life to date, a human being shouting at no less than a direct descendant of Fallgazer was simply unthinkable. Furthermore, he could not comprehend why Asagi, a mere human being, would be concerned for the future of Demonkind.

Iblisveil's demeanor irritated Asagi more and more. She banged a fist onto the tank's armor and yelled, "*Any normal human being* would think you have to stop something like that!"

"...Any normal human being...you say?"

Asagi's blunt assertion made Iblisveil break into laughter. Those who knew him from when he was back in his home nation would likely be greatly surprised. For him, well-known for his wild temperament, to laugh off a lecture from a little human girl was nothing short of miraculous.

"Vattler... I'm sorry. My mood has changed somewhat. I will crush the Knight of Cain."

The prince of the Fallen Dynasty glared at the young aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire as he issued his statement. Iblisveil's imposing words, sounding much like a declaration of war, caused Vattler's beautiful lips to curl up.

"Of course, Your Highness, you may do as please—however, victory belongs to the swift."

The young aristocrat had not even finished his taunt before transforming into golden mist and vanishing.

Iblisveil, silent as he watched the man go, turned to face the robot tank carrying the wounded.

"Perhaps that was too temperamental of me... But I suppose that will be just fine."

"What will?" Asagi asked. Iblisveil seemed to be murmuring to himself.

"Pay no heed," said Iblisveil with a shake of his head, smiling again.

The cargo truck that Yuiri Haba was aboard ran along a narrow mountain road. She was accompanying the retreating Self-Defense Forces unit in the name of protecting those wounded in action.

On top of the coarse road surface, the tires had chains on them to deal with accumulated snow, making the ride in the back of the truck distinctly uncomfortable. If she was careless, she might end up suddenly flung from her provisional bench seat.

“It will be rocky for a while, Attack Mage Haba. I am very sorry. This was the only vehicle available.”

The young special staff sergeant sitting opposite her in back of the truck apologized in an earnest voice. Likely, his polite treatment of her was not because Yuiri was an Attack Mage, but because her status as Hisano’s subordinate carried weight. It wasn’t like he respected Yuiri for her official position.

Painfully aware of that fact, Yuiri’s shoulders felt very cramped as she shook her head and said, “Ah, yes, we’re all right. After all, we were stuffed in here like excess baggage... Ah-ha-ha.”

“Not at all. We are counting on you, Miss Sword Shaman.”

With Yuiri acting so self-deprecating, the staff sergeant smiled at her. Perhaps he was simply being considerate.

The truck that Yuiri and the sergeant were riding in was at the tail end of the convoy. Because her cover story was that she was their escort, guarding against demon-beast pursuit, it made sense to make Yuiri the rear guard. In that sense, the staff sergeant’s words to Yuiri may have been no more than mere flattery.

Though, of course, that didn’t feel bad from Yuiri’s perspective. She had been stuck with her own share of problems—namely, the girl with steel-colored hair who was sitting right next to her.

“Yuri, Yuri!”

The girl, her cheeks stretched from stuffing her face with ration biscuits, tendered both hands toward Yuiri. The Attack Mage inclined her head, desperately trying to wrap her brain around just what the girl’s mysterious

words and gestures were trying to convey. The looks the SDF troops were giving her were painful—she felt like a rookie day care worker having little kids run circles around her.

“Uh, umm... You want seconds?”

“Sec...onds?”

The girl curiously blinked her eyes as if she did not understand the meaning of the word. But her face lit up when she saw Yuiri taking out a fresh biscuit.

“Seconds! Seconds!”

“A-are they tasty?”

“Tasty!”

The sight of the girl chomping the biscuit straight out of Yuiri’s hand made them look like an owner and her beloved pet. It felt less like goodwill and more like she was brimming with affectionate attachment. Yuiri thought it looked as if she was feeding a stray.

“Hey, what’s your name...?”

With great perseverance, Yuiri waited for the girl to finish eating before posing the question.

“You see... I’m Yuiri. And you are?”

She switched poses and hand gestures, asking the question several times, when a light seemed to go on in the girl’s head as she said “Ohh,” her eyes sparkling.

“Glenda.”

“Glenda? That’s your name?”

“Daa, Glenda!”

The girl looked back at Yuiri as she nodded several times.

“Glenda...”

The girl winced as her cheeks widened into a big smile. Yuiri wondered whether Glenda was pleased that Yuiri had addressed her by name. The

rhythmic swaying of Glenda's body resembled a puppy cheerfully wagging its tail back and forth.

“—?!”

The moment her eyes met Glenda's, Yui was struck by a strange hallucination. Her breath caught as powerful sadness and regret coursed through her.

“...Ah...!”

The instant those raw emotions threatened to crush Yui, she awakened from the vision.

It took a little time for her to remember how to breathe. For a while, her entire body shuddered as she raggedly inhaled the bitter, cold air. There was sweat on her palms. She could even tell that her lips had gone pale.

Amid intense dizziness and the ringing in her ears, the bizarre image emerged freshly in the back of her mind.

The scene was of a small city left in a sea of redness that looked like blood.

It was an artificial isle, produced out of metal and carbon fiber, constructed with unfamiliar technologies from another world.

Mayhem had left the buildings in ruin, turning the island into a barren wasteland.

A single boy stood atop a mountain of rubble.

He looked up at the crimson sky in wordless lament.

Soot-black blood coursed from a deep wound in his chest.

He clutched a broken spear—

“Wh-what is that scene...? This girl's—memories...?”

Yui murmured as her ragged breaths came one after another. Her head was jumbled, and it irritated her how her thoughts were in a frenzy. The one and only thing she knew for certain was this girl had shown her the vision. Yui's priestess powers had no doubt reacted to the vestiges of some memory Glenda was tinged with.

“Yui?”

Glenda peered into Yui’s blank face with a look of concern. With a gasp, Yui came back to her senses.

Yui forced a smile. “S-sorry. It’s nothing, really.”

“Mmmm...”

Suspicious, Glenda made a low sound. Yui laughed with the same feeble grin.

The frame of the truck rattled, bouncing up and down as the vehicle seemed to roll over a small rock.

That instant, Glenda gasped and gaped at the sight in front of her. Yui was a little surprised at the girl’s grave expression.

“Glenda?”

“Coming...”

“Huh? What do you...? What’s coming...?”

A moment after the perplexed Yui pressed the issue, they were struck by a powerful jolt that sent them lurching forward. The truck they were riding in had suddenly hit the brakes. After a powerful slide to the side that threatened to roll them over, they finally came to a stop safe and sound against the barricade at the shoulder of the road.

Glenda had nearly been thrown from her seat, but Yui had just managed to hold her in place. Even so, Glenda’s expression remained unchanged as she looked outside through a small, shuttered window.

“Attack Mage Haba, there!” shouted the staff sergeant in the seat opposite to hers as he glared at the truck’s rear.

There stood a monster.

A humanoid creature resembling a skeleton was closing in, seemingly in pursuit of Yui and the others. It was between three and four meters tall. Its internal organs had a machinelike quality; its exposed veins pulsed rhythmically. However you looked at it, this was not a living creature from the natural world.

In Yuiri's mind, it looked as if one had fashioned a living object from little more than a car frame.

The truck had rammed itself into the shoulder of the road to evade the monster's attack.

"Automata... No, a golem...? But what's this...*icky* feeling I'm getting?!"

Yui's cheek twitched from the bizarre magical energy she felt swirling around the monster. The power was plainly of a different nature than any sorcery Yuiri knew of. Just looking at it gave rise to disgust, on par with looking at a wriggling swarm of noxious pests.

"Ah... Aaaaaah!"

One of the SDF troops opened fire. He had used a large caliber, anti-demon shotgun. The gunshot had been at close range, but the monster simply shrugged it off. Its cartilage-like frame squished and bent, but she didn't sense that it was in any pain.

"This is bad—!"

The humanoid monster stretched forth its unnaturally long right arm, ripping the truck's canopy off with ease and groping its way into the steel flatbed. The monstrous hand was pursuing Glenda.

The silver-haired girl shrank back in visible fear as Yuiri leaped in to cover her.

"Rosen Chevalier Plus, activate—!"

The silver long sword was shrouded in a shimmering ray of light as it sliced down toward the monster's arm. With a great, weighty sound, the enormous metal arm rolled onto the truck's flatbed.

Even if it couldn't feel pain, that had to have made it lose its balance. The huge monster wobbled, staggering down to one knee.

"Run! Please—run while you still can!"

Yui shouted to the SDF troops remaining in the back of the truck. Despite being Special Attack Mage Unit troops, their current status was that of casualties. It was Yuiri's assigned duty to buy time until they could complete their evacuation. Fortunately, Yuiri's Rosen Chevalier Plus was a pretty good

match against golems. This was because the bulwark created by pseudo-spatial slicing could completely nullify an enemy's physical attacks, and Rosen Chevalier Plus's blade was able to effortlessly cleave metal in two.

"A-Attack Mage Haba!!"

The voice of the staff sergeant, last to leave the truck, was distorted from fright. The frame of the truck Yuiri and the others had been riding was dissolving like quicksilver. The large truck's matter was rearranging itself into the form of a new skeletal humanoid.

"Wha—?! What...is this? Is this alchemy...?!"

Yuri could not conceal her distress over the strange spectacle before her.

Sorcery to turn a truck into a humanoid monster—it resembled the *Make Golem* spells alchemists employed. However, the effects of alchemy were unsuited to complex machinery, and in the first place, *Make Golem* could only make objects move if they were constructed to mimic the forms of living creatures.

However, these monsters were different. Their weight, speed, power, and automated movements—all had the character of machines.

The information contained in the man-made object known as a truck remained. Only its form had changed.

A human being living in another world would probably characterize a truck as a monster upon seeing one for the first time. *That's what I'm feeling right now*, thought Yuri.

"Yuri!"

As Yuri stood still, Glenda leaped to her and embraced her. With raw physical strength unimaginable for such a small frame, she jumped straight over the head of the first monster. Then, she landed gently some distance from the truck with all the grace of a bird.

A moment later, the object that had once been a truck completed its transformation into a monster. Had Glenda not pulled her away, Yuri would surely have been trapped inside.

Behind Yuiri and Glenda, the young staff sergeant in danger of being swallowed by the transformation himself dropped to the ground. Other SDF troops were lying on the ground nearby, but the monsters cared nothing for them. The SDF troops were not the monsters' target. The hollow eyes of the two monsters were trained upon Glenda alone.

"We have found you...Glenda."

Then, from behind the monsters, Yuiri heard a voice pass between them. It was a machine-modulated female voice.

The individual was shrouded in a gunmetal-colored robe, standing behind the monsters as she glared at Glenda. Yuiri couldn't see the woman's face under the robe because she wore a mask over it, but the sight of the woman holding a metal rod made her look like a sorceress straight out of a fairy tale.

"Glenda, could she be an...acquaintance of yours?"

Yuri posed the question as she brandished her long sword. Glenda vigorously shook her head side to side. Yuri had expected as much. She didn't think a woman making monsters attack them would be on Glenda's side.

Yuri kept her guard up as she glared at the woman in the gunmetal robe. Even if her enemy's numbers increased, Yuri still held the advantage. The woman's technique of turning a truck into a monster might have been a pain, but the monster created as a result was no match for Rosen Chevalier Plus.

However, the gunmetal magic user's next action was beyond Yuri's expectations.

The woman continued to stare at Glenda as she made a statement of odd words.

"—Glenda, acknowledge code: 49 72657175657374 72656c6963 6173 737563636573736f72. We demand the relic as the rightful inheritors."

When the woman uttered those words, she fell silent, seemingly awaiting Glenda's response. A strange silence befell them.

"...Mii?"

Finally, Glenda shook her head, saying that while looking at Yuri, seemingly

seeking her aid.

Of course, Yuiri had no idea what was going on, either. She set her jumbled breaths in order and her eyes shifted between Glenda and the woman.

“4772656e641 646f 796f7572 64757479! Glenda! Fulfill your duty!”

Finally, the woman shouted. Glenda shrank away in fear.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say, but—!”

Having finally settled on what to do, Yuiri began to act. She kept the tip of her long sword trained on the woman as she fished out her Attack Mage license and thrust it toward the gunmetal magic user.

“Under the Attack Mage Special Measures Act, I hereby place you under arrest for illegal use of magic in assault, battery, and the destruction of property! Lay down your weapon and surrender!”

“You are in my way, Sword Shaman.”

The woman ignored Yuiri’s warning and brandished her rod high. The monsters resounded with a metallic roar and, with the ground echoing beneath them, they leaped. One went for Yuiri from overhead; the other targeted Glenda.

“Why you—!”

Yui made a great upward swing with her sword, aiming at the monster coming at her. The silver long sword was enveloped in the dazzling radiance of ritual energy, shrouded in a pseudo-spatial severing blade.

There was no need for complicated swordsmanship. A single blow released from Rosen Chevalier Plus at maximum power easily cleaved the huge monster in two. Or rather—it should have.

Just before Yuiri’s sword made contact, the monster’s entire body was enveloped in a pitch-black aura.

“What?!”

With a sound like that of glass cracking, the pseudo-spatial severing blade shattered. Yuiri’s attack, now turned into a simple sword blow, bounced

fruitlessly off the bones of the monster's upper arm.

"It blocked Rosen Chevalier Plus...?!" Yuiri frailly murmured as she somehow regained her poise upon landing.

The source of the black aura surrounding the monsters was the robe worn by the gunmetal magic user. The darkness trickling out from the robe's sleeves completely cloaked the monsters' flesh, nullifying Rosen Chevalier Plus's abilities. It was as if the sword's supernatural power had never existed to begin with.

"Yuri!"

There was no time to gawk, for Glenda's cry beat against Yuri's eardrums. The girl, running in a panic from the other monster, had been driven to the edge of a precipice.

"Glenda, run!"

Yuri readied her long sword once more, this time slicing into the back of the monster attacking Glenda.

Even so, the result was the same. Rosen Chevalier Plus's abilities could not penetrate the jet-black otherworldly barrier covering the monsters.

"In that case—!!"

Yuri horizontally sliced through thin air, rending space itself. She used the spatial dislocation as a barricade to halt the monster's progress.

However, the gunmetal magic user's aura destroyed even this spatial dislocation instantly.

"Wha—?!"

Yuri's face twisted in despair. The huge monster created from the truck was lumbering toward Yuri. With her bulwark destroyed, Yuri had no way to fend off the attack.

I'll be crushed—

Thinking this, Yuri resigned herself to her own death.

It was the next instant that something in Glenda...changed.

“Yuiriiiiii!”

Glenda made a high-pitched scream that gradually transformed into the roar of a beast.

Her coat was sent flying. The hide that appeared underneath was covered in beautiful scales. The tiny girl was changing into the form of an enormous beast with four malevolent limbs and fantastical wings. Her body was serpentine, reminiscent of the dinosaurs of old.

All sight of Glenda had vanished, leaving nothing but an enormous dragon with a mane the color of steel. It was an overwhelming shift that could not be written off as the transformation of a beast person.

“...Glenda... What are you...?!”

Yuri's thoughts ground to a halt.

The silver dragon sent the humanoid monster flying. Even if the monsters surrounded Glenda, now in dragon form, Yuri didn't think they could overcome her.

However, the gunmetal magic user was unfazed. She'd probably known Glenda's true nature from the beginning.

The gunmetal robe seemed to move of its own will, spreading around the dragon's enormous body. The transformed Glenda trembled, seemingly buckling under the agony. The dragon's four limbs slackened, and she fell onto her side. The gunmetal magic user's ability worked even on dragons.

“Seize her,” the woman commanded the metal monsters.

I have to save Glenda, thought Yuri. After all, that girl had transformed into a dragon to save her. However, Yuri had no idea how to help her.

The Sword Shaman martial arts techniques developed to battle demons were ineffective against monsters of metal. Even Rosen Chevalier Plus was ineffective against the gunmetal magic user.

Someone, save us...

Forgetting her Sword Shaman status, Yuri prayed like a helpless child.

A moment later...

A silver flash tore through the pitch-black membrane stretching from the gunmetal magic user's robe.

In truth, the flash was a metallic spear. The pale glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect split the aura from the magic user's robe as easily as if it were paper.

And then, dazzling golden lightning mowed the huge monsters down, leaving not even a single trace behind.

The difference in power was overwhelming. It was a one-sided beatdown that could not even be called combat.

Before Yuiri's eyes, a dense mass of demonic energy took physical form, landing in the form of a lightning lion.

"Ah...," Yuiri murmured, dumbfounded.

Along with the lightning lion stood a boy wearing a parka and a languid expression. Standing right beside him was a girl in a school uniform holding a silver spear. She had both delicate beauty and the supple ferocity of a feline beast.

"Yui, are you all right?!"

This girl called out Yuiri's name.

Of course, Yuiri knew her name as well—as well as the name of the silver spear she wielded.

I'm so glad, thought Yuiri in relief. *It's going to be okay now,* she said to Glenda inside her own mind.

They had come. The World's Mightiest Vampire and his observer.

Fatigued beyond belief, Yuiri used the last of her strength to call out the girl's name:

"Yukii..."

Then, Yuiri blacked out.



Intermission iii

Around the same time as when Yui Haba and the others were under attack by the monsters...

The vehicle Kojou and Yukina were aboard was kicking up a dust cloud as it raced across a winding mountain road.

The vehicle was a North American Union–manufactured Armored Personnel Carrier. It was not a vehicle from the Self-Defense Forces. The vehicle had a diplomatic license plate attached to it.

The driver was the Oceanus Girls' platinum-blond beauty, wearing fatigues with a bandanna wrapped around her head. Navigation from the assistant driver's seat was handled by a rich-looking girl with a blue kerchief.

Kojou, Yukina, and the rest of the Oceanus Girls were riding in the APC's passenger compartment.

The cargo compartment was cramped—chock full of a large quantity of firearms and munitions. Kojou and Yukina were sitting side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Now that the uniform cleaning was finally complete, they were on their way to rescue Nagisa.

However, they did not speak to each other. All that passed between them was a heavy, strained silence.

Yukina's mood had been thoroughly soured ever since the bath incident.

"Now, Himeragi, about that stuff earlier—"

Unable to bear the unpleasant atmosphere, Kojou reluctantly broached the subject. However, Yukina did not meet his eyes as she bluntly shook her head.

"It is quite all right. There is no problem."

"Huh...? How do you figure that?"

"I saw nothing. Therefore, I have no knowledge of senpai's indecent

exposure.”

“I wasn’t indecent! I was just naked in the bath!” Kojou replied irritably, trying to avoid what Yukina was insisting.

She gave him a cold, half-lidded glare as she said, “Kisaki was wearing a swimsuit just fine.”

“She decided to come in all on her own! And having a swimsuit or not ain’t the problem—it’s that Kisaki barged into the men’s bath!”

“*Haah.*” Yukina sighed. “I suppose that’s true,” she said half-heartedly.

“Just to make this clear, having you peek on me in the bath isn’t enough to bother me so you don’t need to worry about it, Himeragi. Nagisa’s walked in on me when I’m changing clothes, so this is nothing new.”

All the same, when Kojou blithely walked in when his little sister was getting dressed, she didn’t speak a word to him for three days, something he still felt was unreasonable to the extreme.

“It...it was not that I was peeking...but if that is what you say, I shall not mind it.”

For some reason, Yukina’s demeanor suddenly softened when she heard Kojou’s words. She made a tiny cough to clear her throat as he saw a soft, pleasant smile come over her. She’d been so taken aback by the explanation Kojou had given that her mood underwent a dramatic change.

Overhearing Kojou and Yukina’s conversation from the driver’s seat, the beautiful girl with the red bandanna asked the girl with the blue kerchief, “Hey, Martha...normally, being treated the same as someone’s little sister makes a girl angry I think, so why is Yukina in such a good mood?”

Martha giggled, revealing a knowing smile as she said, “You see, Vika, the Fourth Primogenitor is particularly known as a man...who has a thing for little sister types.”

“Ahh! So being in the same category as his little sister means that’s how much he cares about her. Wow!”

“We can hear you, y’know!”

Wow, *my ass*, thought Kojou, pressing a palm to his cheek in a visible sulk.

“N-no, I’m not in *that* great of a mood because of that!”

Yukina’s face was beet red as she spoke. However, as she did so, the Oceanus Girls turned warm, smiling faces toward her that seemed to say, *It’s okay, we get it.*

“...And for that matter, why are you girls coming with us? I mean, I’m grateful you’re driving us all the way to Kannawa Lake and all...,” Kojou said with a sigh, though his question was somewhat late at this point.

Martha, the girl in the blue kerchief, glanced back at Kojou, tossing a suggestive smile his way as she said,

“The Duke of Ardeal commanded us to give the Fourth Primogenitor our utmost hospitality, you see.”

“Besides, we can’t let such an interesting...er, amazing situation slip by...er, escape our attention, so!” Gripping the wheel, the voice of the girl in the red bandanna suddenly spiked at the end.

“Well, thanks.” Kojou’s shoulders sank in dejection as a listless, dry laugh trickled out of him.

Though they were aiding Kojou as he risked his life to rescue his little sister, it was apparently no more than an amusement to pass the time for them. Somehow, even thanking them for it felt wrong. It seemed less Vattler’s mischievous nature spreading to them than a bunch of celebrities with way too much time on their hands.

But since their passing the time was helping him out, he couldn’t exactly object.

Up ahead were SDF soldiers standing at the fork for the narrow road heading to Kannawa Lake. A checkpoint.

“Civilian vehicles are not permitted past this point. Please turn around.”

A guardsman spoke those words to them as he stared suspiciously at the APC’s diplomatic license plate.

From the driver’s seat, Vika shot Kojou a delighted expression. *OK if I bust*

through the checkpoint? was her unspoken question to Kojou.

Certainly, given the APC's specs, busting through the checkpoint barricade was not a difficult task, but he mentally cringed at pointlessly making enemies of the SDF. That said, he didn't think politely explaining the situation would result in being allowed to pass.

What should we do? Kojou pondered. That moment, Yukina suddenly rose to her feet. She leaned over toward the driver's seat and stated to the soldier at the checkpoint with a businesslike tone:

"Bureau of Astrology. I am heading to Kannawa Lake on a demon beast subjugation assignment."

"Bureau of Astrology?"

"You have heard it is an emergency, I take it?"

"Ah...yes, but..."

"I have an Attack Mage license and ID. Please confirm for yourself."

"Priestess of the Six Blades...t-twenty-nine years old?!"

The soldier's eyes went wide with surprise when he checked the ID that Yukina had passed to him. Then he glanced at the ID photo one more time, comparing it to Yukina's face.

"Is there something amiss?"

The corner of Yukina's lips twitched as she raised a particularly frigid voice.

"No. Pardon my rudeness."

The SDF soldier swiftly saluted, lifting the barricade to let Kojou's car through.

"Thanks," said Vika, the girl in the red bandana, politely waving as she put the vehicle into motion.

Then, when the SDF soldiers were no longer in sight, the interior of the vehicle was engulfed in bursts of laughter, both at how Yukina had presented herself as twenty-nine with a straight face, and how funny it was that the soldier had completely fallen for it.

"Why do you find that so funny—?!"

Yukina was glaring at Kojou with annoyance. Kojou wiped tears from the corners of his eyes as he said,

“No, I’m, like... The fake IDs Kisasi gave us were actually helpful.”

“Urgh...”

Why did I have to go through this? thought Yukina, resentfully biting her lip. Kiriha Kisasi had given them fake Bureau of Astrology IDs before parting their separate ways. They had proven their worth moments earlier, but setting Yukina’s age so that she was “pushing thirty” felt like malice on Kiriha’s part.

“Fourth Primogenitor...” In the assistant driver’s seat, Martha addressed Kojou in a gentle voice.

The smiles on the faces of the remaining Oceanus Girls vanished.

Multiple SDF vehicles were approaching their APC from the other direction. The vehicles bore numerous scars, perhaps traces of combat with demon beasts, causing a painful air to hover over them. The driving was sloppy for vehicles going downhill on a narrow mountain road. They were like a routed army with no time to worry about such petty concerns. The faces of the troops riding the vehicles bore a bizarre amount of tension—and unconcealed fear.

“It appears they are transporting casualties.”

“Yeah...but something’s weird.”

Kojou both agreed with Yukina’s murmur as he felt separate doubts.

If they were retreating with casualties in tow, he could understand the anxiety he sensed from them. But the raw fear emanating from them was plainly separate from the exhaustion and fatigue engendered by their injuries.

It was as if they were desperately fleeing from a foe drawing near—

“Stop the car!!”

Kojou shouted as soon as he felt the presence of enormous demonic energy.

By that time, Vika had already hit the brakes. The APC slid against the shoulder against the road, riding up it at an incline, whereupon Kojou immediately leaped out.

He could see giant figures standing on the other side of densely packed trees—gleaming, metallic, humanoid monsters.

“Himeragi, that’s—”

“Yes, golems. The ritual is not one I have seen before, but there is little doubt...!”

Yukina replied as she deployed her folded silver spear.

Kojou audibly clenched his teeth. It was still some distance between them and Kannawa Lake, where Nagisa awaited. He’d never imagined their path would be obstructed by monsters in a place like that.

“Please, all of you, stay here! If it looks bad, don’t think—run!” Kojou shouted to the Oceanus Girls as they began preparing weapons.

“We understand.”

“We have no intention of hindering you.”

“Fight well.”

The girls replied with tones of voice that somehow felt rather refined.

Thanks, said Kojou’s silent nod as he raced toward the monsters. It was a moment later that his vision caught sight of a new demon beast.

“What the...?! A dragon?!”

Kojou grimaced when he saw it. It had the body of a serpent and malevolent wings, four stout limbs and an enormous frame.

Dragons were so rare that they were rumored to be extinct; even in Itogami Island, a Demon Sanctuary, none had ever set sight on the species. The sudden appearance of such an endangered species took him by surprise. Even so, Kojou’s feet did not stop. He’d seen Nalakuveras and Leviathan; he was a bit shocked that a “mere” dragon was not enough to stop him in his tracks.

There was a girl in a school uniform wielding a long, silver sword, trying to protect that dragon.

“Yuri?!”

Noticing the girl, Yukina called out her name in surprise.

“Himeragi, you know her?”

“She is a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. We were at High God Forest together—”

I see, thought Kojou, exhaling in relief. Steel-colored monsters that looked like products of sorcery, or a girl protecting a wounded dragon—the faint, remaining conflict over which side to help vanished from his mind.

“Guess we don’t need to worry about which side to lend a hand to!”

“Right!”

Clenching her silver spear, Yukina leaped toward the monsters. For his part, Kojou summoned one of his Beast Vassals to support her.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE PRIMOGENITOR
AND THE DRAGON

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRIMOGENITOR AND THE DRAGON

1

“Yukina...”

Yui, the girl in the school uniform, murmured as she gazed dumbfounded at Yukina.

Kojou gave a little smile and thought, *I get it*. Yukina’s words were true—this girl really was a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. Siding with her was the right call after all.

“Is that the golems’ boss...? She sure looks like it, but...”

Kojou slightly knit his brows, glaring at the woman who wore her silver charcoal robe like a true magician. It didn’t look as if she was cosplaying, and he didn’t think someone would go out in that getup without an actual reason.

“Fourth Primogenitor...”

The magic user gazed at Kojou in annoyance as she spoke. Her gaze was cold, as if looking at garbage by the roadside.

“You know about me...?” Kojou inquired back in surprise.

However, the silver charcoal magic user said nothing in return.

A moment after the woman wordlessly hoisted her rod, an enormous roar made Kojou’s skin tremble.

“What the—?!”

“Senpai, behind you!”

Yukina shouted at the confused Kojou. When Kojou looked back, his eyes beheld the sight of an enormous demon beast beating the trees down as it

advanced. It was a two-legged, pterosaur-like creature with a wingspan reaching tens of meters.

“Wha?! The heck is that?!”

“A wyvern—!”

Yukina thrust Kojou aside as the wyvern’s talons raced past, barely missing the top of Kojou’s head. He’d nearly had his head taken off.

“Shit...! C’mon over, Regulus Aurum!”

Kojou commanded his own Beast Vassal to strike back. As the lion materialized via vast demonic energy, it moved to swipe a foreleg down right before the wyvern’s eyes.

But the gunmetal magic user went on the move before it connected. A black aura filtering out from the inside of the woman’s robe spread like ink covering the water’s surface, obstructing Kojou’s Demon Beast’s path.

Heedless, the lightning lion tried to rip it asunder, but—

“What?!”

The instant it touched the pitch-black aura, the lion’s foreleg bounced off without a sound. The thunder and lightning surrounding the Beast Vassal dissipated and vanished; not even a spark remained.

The wyvern enveloped by the aura was unharmed. It had merely been knocked off-balance from the shock of the collision.

Yukina’s eyes went wide, like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “It... withstood an attack from the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal?!”

A Beast Vassal was a condensed amalgamation of demonic energy; no living being could withstand a blow from such a thing. It was said that nothing could defeat a Beast Vassal save smashing it with even greater magical energy—but there was a single exception.

“Himeragi, just now...!”

“Yes. It is the same as during the Black Bible Incident...!”

Yukina clenched her silver spear as a grave expression came over her.

There was one other way to oppose a Beast Vassal: complete nullification of its demonic energy. That was why Yukina, the observer of the Fourth Primogenitor, had been granted a Schneewaltzer, which possessed that very ability.

So far as Kojou and Yukina knew, there was but a single way to nullify demonic energy other than with a Schneewaltzer—the Black Bible once employed by Aya Tokoyogi. With it, she had rendered Kojou’s Beast Vassals powerless by turning Itogami Island into *a world where supernatural power did not exist*.

The black energy employed by the silver charcoal magic user greatly resembled the ability of the Black Bible.

“Glenda...”

When the wyvern swooped down, the silver charcoal magic user murmured bitterly, gazing at the fallen dragon as she leaped on the wyvern’s back.

“Wait.....!”

When Kojou attempted to summon a new Beast Vassal to strike down the retreating wyvern, his face grimaced with pain. His right hand was pleading for mercy, feeling a pain as if it had been burned. It was his wound from where Paper Noise had stabbed him with Snowdrift Wolf back on Itogami Island.

“Senpai...your hand...”

Noticing something was wrong with Kojou, Yukina’s face went pale as she rushed over. He’d instantly meant to hide it, but she’d noticed too soon.

“Yeah, it’s a bit messed up.” He smiled as he broke into a sweat from the fierce pain. “It’s no biggie.” There was Yuiri and a fallen dragon right beside them. He didn’t think giving Yukina extra worries was a good idea.

“Backlash from summoning the Beast Vassal?”

“Could be.”

Crack-like scars had spread over the back of his right hand. The exact cause was unclear, but the combat a moment ago seemed to have made his symptoms worse.

“More importantly, Himeragi, these girls are—”

Seeing for himself that the immediate danger had passed, Kojou looked behind him. Yui, with her long sword, should have been right there with the wounded, fallen dragon, but...

“D-don’t look—!”

Nervousness came over the girl’s face as she stared at Kojou and shrieked.

The dragon was changing shape within the school-uniformed Sword Shaman’s very arms—from an enormous dragon to a small, silver-haired girl. She looked about thirteen or fourteen, and she had an adorable face.

And of course, the girl was not wearing anything. The clothes she’d originally been wearing had most likely been ripped into shreds when she’d transformed into a dragon.

“Ah?” Yukina exclaimed, less surprised by the dragon changing form than by the fact she was naked.

“Huh...?!”

Kojou was just as surprised as she was. He was frozen with shock as he stared at the dragon girl’s naked human body. Yui was desperately trying to shield her, but her efforts were largely futile; perhaps she was in a panic herself.

“Senpai, how long are you going to stare?”

Yukina, the first to regain her composure, obstructed Kojou’s vision with a hand as she glared at him.

“S-sorry! My bad!”

Kojou gasped and snapped back to his senses, turning his face aside as he spoke.

It was then that the malicious whispers of multiple people rode a cold wind to reach Kojou’s ears.

“H-hey.”

“Yeah, it’s a vampire... What’s a demon doing here...?”

“And that girl—is she...a beast person?”

Wounded SDF troops were staring at Kojou as they surrounded him from a distance. The troops were meeting one another's eyes as they continued to whisper in low voices. Kojou was unused to their hostile, inquisitive gazes. It was an emotion largely unexperienced by him to date.

Hostility and fear toward demons—

“Senpai...”

Yukina gently moved her body close to Kojou's, almost as if lending him support.

Kojou felt her warmth as he slowly looked up at the sky. It was covered with low, thin, gray clouds in the dead of winter, a season never to intrude on Itogami Island's endless summer—

“Ah...yeah.”

That's right, thought Kojou as it finally hit him.

“This isn't a Demon Sanctuary, I guess.”

2

Still held aloft by the robot tank's manipulator arm, Shio Hikawa returned to the rampart of Kamioda Dam. The wounded Hisano Akatsuki, Gajou, and the still-sleeping Nagisa were with them as well.

“Japan's defense forces were brutalized, I see.”

Iblisveil made the icy declaration as he gazed upon the wreckage of demolished armored vehicles.

With the arrival of medical platoon troops on the rampart, aid was being rendered to those wounded in action. When the robot tank stopped a short distance away, Shio began administering first aid to Gajou and Hisano. The disappearance of Yui Haba weighed upon her, but treating the wounded came first.

Raised to be assassins, the Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency were exceedingly well versed in the layout of the human body. They also received considerable training in life-saving treatments due to frequently being

assigned VIP escort missions. Borrowing a first-aid kit stuffed into a tank, Shio somehow managed to finish treating their injuries.

Hisano's and Gajou's wounds ran deep, but fortunately, they did not appear to be life-threatening. Even in such a perilous situation, they had been able to protect their vital spots. That said, it was, of course, impossible for them to fight any further.

"It would seem you are the only one present capable of proper conversation, girl."

It was the prince of the Fallen Dynasty who addressed the meek-of-spirit, half-beside-herself Shio.

"First, allow me to ask your name. You would appear to be a human Attack Mage, but why is a child such as yourself here?"

Shio slowly turned to him. *You're the child here*, she was in danger of saying out loud, but she swallowed the words.

She'd recovered a little of her depleted willpower, likely from adrenaline secretions from her anger.

"Your Highness Iblisveil Aziz, I am Shio Hikawa, a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency."

Shio rose to her feet and looked straight toward the vampire prince. *Oh*, went Iblisveil, raising an eyebrow in amusement at Shio's spirited demeanor.

A girl with an extravagant hairstyle poked her head out of the tank's hatch and asked Shio from above, "The Lion King Agency... You're with Himeragi?"

She had the spectacular face of a magazine model, and her name was written on a name space over her breasts. Her outfit seemed rather provocative, and Shio had no idea why she was wearing it. Shio was thinking this was a person who lived in a different world than she did, leaving her somewhat surprised at the name coming from the girl's lips.

"You know Yukina Himeragi, er... Asagi...Aiba?"

"Huh? How do you know my name...?"

For an instant, the beautiful girl with model-grade beauty tilted her head with

a questioning look, then gasped and looked down at her breasts. Her cheeks went scarlet as she quickly covered up the space upon which her name had been written.

“I-it’s not what you think! I was forced to wear this stupid thing to get in the tank, so—”

“R-right.”

First impressions aside, she’s kinda cute, thought Shio, all tension draining away.

Contrary to her appearance, she was quick with her wits. *If she was in plainer clothes, she’d probably have boys falling all over her,* she thought with a twinge of pity, not that it was really her problem. Either way, the fact that she knew Yukina Himeragi made it likely she, too, was connected to the Fourth Primogenitor. If that was the case, Shio could understand the girl being here.

“Well then, Shio and company, I would ask of you the circumstances. What is your objective, and why have the Cleansers appeared in this land?” Iblisveil resumed his cross-examination of Shio.

Shio bit her lip a little, unsure just what to say.

The boy before her eyes was a prince of another country—furthermore, a vampire of the Fallen Dynasty. Unable to determine whether he was the Lion King Agency’s ally, Shio couldn’t divulge details of the operation to him on her own authority—even if the result was to court Iblisveil’s anger.

“I am...not authorized to speak about—” Shio’s lips trembled as she replied.

“Oh, so you refuse to answer my question, Shio Hikawa. There is value in a faithful hound.”

Iblisveil smiled ferociously. The raw bloodlust emanating from him chilled Shio’s entire body.

“However, if you have no intention of informing he who saved your lives, you are already beneath any beast. Therefore, I must administer appropriate discipline. Perhaps you will be more forthcoming with information after I have torn off one of your limbs—”

Shio could not avert her eyes from the gleaming-white fangs bared by Iblisveil's smile.

She had a premonition: If she let her guard down for a split second, she would be killed. Cold sweat rose from her every pore. *Asagi Aiba is no normal person if she's fine working with a monster like this*, thought Shio.

The fact that Shio still did not bend to Iblisveil's coercion was due to competitiveness toward her junior, Yukina Himeragi. It was said that Yukina monitored the Fourth Primogenitor, even more of a monster than Iblisveil, twenty-four hours a day. Shio, wanting with all her heart not to lose to her own junior, endured his intimidation.

Seeing Shio like that, Iblisveil grinned with even greater amusement, his ghastly, oppressive might increasing in turn, when...

"Hold up, Your Highness. That's a little too much teasing for an earnest girl like this. I'm a civilian, so I don't mind bringing you up to speed on the circumstances."

Gajou, lying on an army cot, sat up and addressed Iblisveil. In no time at all, the oppressive energy binding Shio in place vanished like it had never existed.

"Gajou?! Are you fit enough to be talking?!"

Asagi stared at the gravely wounded Gajou as she posed her question.

"Ohh, Asagi, huh? The outfits you high schoolers are wearing these days sure are daring. You're wasted on that fool Kojou."

"Gyaaa!" went Asagi, letting out a cry as she sank back into the tank.

If only I was only ten years younger, thought Gajou with genuine regret. However, even as he casually shot the breeze, his blood loss caught up with him and his face went pale.

"It's a tough haul, but I'm managing somehow, thanks to the first aid you gave me, Shio. And to be blunt, I'm gonna pass out if I keep talkin' like this."

"...Gajou Akatsuki, the Death Returnee, is it? I heard you were at Dodekatos's excavation site, but just as rumor would have it, you are a most frivolous man." Iblisveil cast his eyes on Gajou in minimal admiration. "However, I do not mind

if it is you instead. Answer me, then, Gajou Akatsuki. What is the Cleansers' objective? And what are you doing at this lake?"

"To be blunt, I don't know for sure what the terrorists want. But what I can say for certain is that the Lion King Agency's goal is to seal Avalon. So before I knew it, the lake was all frozen like this, and the demon beasts appeared out of the blue—"

"Avalon? What is that?" Iblisveil furrowed his brows as he redirected the witness.

"A relic of The Cleansing. That's the cover story, at least. Supposedly, a god-killing weapon sealed by the Devas, just like the Fourth Primogenitor."

"Hmph, I see... You used Dodekatos's demonic energy to try to seal a relic of The Cleansing, did you not? Only short-lived humans would think of coming up with names for god-killing weapons."

Iblisveil slowly surveyed the frozen Kannawa Lake. Vast demonic energy that could freeze over sixty million cubic tons of artificial lake water was surely a threat to Iblisveil as well. A look of awe mixed with exasperation came over him.

"So this glacier is the work of Alrescha Glacies, then. Even removed from the blood and flesh of the host, what incredible strength! ...Though it irritates me to speak the words, it is not called a primogenitor's Beast Vassal for nothing. Were Avalon a simple god-killing weapon, this might well be able to seal it away."

"Then, why...?" Shio murmured, unwittingly speaking aloud.

Truthfully, the resealing of Avalon had failed, and a great number of demon beasts had spawned. This had invited the pernicious terrorists known as the Cleansers to intervene. The Lion King Agency's operation had failed.

"That is self-evident. This Avalon you attempted to seal was not a god-killing weapon at all. I am skeptical that it was even sealed away to begin with."

Iblisveil made the assertion in a scornful tone. His words left Shio reeling.

"B-but...if what we tried to seal wasn't a god-killing weapon, then what exactly is Avalon...?"

“Why, when you heard it was a relic of The Cleansing, did you assume it was a weapon?”

“Huh?”

Iblisveil’s question struck Shio like a sucker punch.

She’d accepted the explanations from Shirona Kuraki and the others without a single doubt, so she’d never realized it, but now that someone had brought it up, the link between *relic* and *weapon* was a dubious one. *Why did I trust that it was a dangerous weapon hidden inside Avalon without question?* regretfully thought Shio.

There hadn’t been a single shred of evidence to prove such a thing; none, save the vague folklore that calamity slept within.

“The first thing people think of when they hear the word *relic* is some kind of treasure. If it was, say, a divine treasure granted to the one qualified to succeed the Sinful God—well, *that* would be under some serious protection.”

“So it was being protected rather than sealed away... Then, don’t tell me, the dragon we saw earlier was...”

“A dragon...you say?”

When Shio spoke, it was Iblisveil’s turn to be taken aback.

“Shio Hikawa. You saw a dragon?”

“Y-yes. But it was for only a second, and because the mist is in the way, I don’t know where it is now...”

Shio’s voice went shrill under the scrutiny of Iblisveil’s glare.

The enormous crevice left in the frozen surface of the lake came to the back of her mind. It was an unnatural fissure—as if some enormous creature had crawled out of it. Perhaps that was a trace left behind by a dragon sleeping at the bottom of the lake.

Poking her head out from the tank’s hatch, Asagi Aiba skeptically murmured, “A dragon... A real, live dragon?”

“If it was flying around, we’d catch sight of it pretty fast, I’d think... I mean,

there's still a ton of SDF troops around."

Hearing this, Gajou, still on top of the army cot, leaped to his feet as he suddenly realized something. "The SDF...! I see... So that's how it is... Ow!!"

"Ah, Gajou Akatsuki?"

"My, my," said Iblisveil, shaking his head in exasperation, when his gaze suddenly sharpened. "Asagi, Lydianne...take shelter inside the tank for the time being."

"What?"

Iblisveil's sudden warning confused Asagi.

The vampire prince was glaring at a group of soldiers walking across the embankment. The armed men were heading straight toward Shio and company.

"Keep your heads down. You do not wish for trouble with the local authorities, I trust?"

"Ah, yeah. Sorry, we'll let you handle this."

"I am in your debt, Lord Iblis."

"Hmph."

The pair in the robot tank closed the pilot-seat hatch. Civilians like Lydianne Didier and Asagi Aiba riding a tank in an area closed by the Self-Defense Forces was an issue, but if they looked like retainers of Iblisveil, the SDF couldn't lay a finger on them—that was most likely the basis of Iblisveil's thinking. Shio found it surprising that Iblisveil would show such consideration toward the two girls.

"Who are they, Shio Hikawa?" Iblisveil asked the girl.

His attention was on the man with the soldiers who looked like a commanding officer. The man's entire body was wrapped in fresh bandages; perhaps he'd been involved in combat with the demon beasts.

"Major Azama of the SDF, the officer in command of this operation..."

"Hmm... I see." Iblisveil smirked suggestively.

When Shio saw that smile, another light went on in her mind. Asagi's words, Gajou's reaction, and now the doubts inside Shio herself—her doubts only piled

higher.

Special Major Azama's feet came to a halt in front of Shio and the others as he inquired, "Attack Mage Hikawa, who are these people? And is High Priest Akatsuki injured?"

Gajou Akatsuki replied to the question in a joking tone, "She ain't hurt all that bad. That hag's in stupidly good shape."

"Are you a civilian...? It seems you are gravely wounded," Azama said as he examined the blood-covered Gajou. Then he glanced at Iblisveil and said, "And that is a demon? I want to hear about this in detail afterward... But treating the wounded takes priority. First, please hand over the girl...Nagisa Akatsuki."

Azama's gaze shifted to the still sleeping girl in a priestess outfit.

The next moment, Shio went to Nagisa Akatsuki's side, seemingly shielding her as she glared at Azama, who slightly knit his brows at Shio's inexplicable behavior.

"Attack Mage Hikawa?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot obey that order."

Shio stretched a hand to her hip holster, gripping the silver recurve bow mounted therein. "Freikugel Plus Proto Three—unlock."

She nocked a fresh arrow to her bow, silently pulling the drawstring.

"Please stay where you are, Major Azama."

With that statement, Shio angled the tip of her arrow, pointing it at Azama's heart.

3

"The prince...of the Fallen Dynasty?"

Sitting on the shoulder of a winding mountain road, Kojou peered at the screen of a modified smartphone. He was speaking to an avatar resembling a badly sewn teddy bear.

"The heck? Why is a guy like that with Asagi?"

"It seems that Li'l Miss Asagi and company managed to reel him in with a cup of ramen."

"Wait—reel him in?"

Reeling a vampire prince in with a cup of ramen—Kojou had no idea what that meant. But it seemed Asagi was not in any imminent peril.

"I don't really get it, but anyway, seems like Nagisa and the others are safe. For now, I'll let your side take care of it. Tell Asagi it's gonna take a little more time to meet up with her."

"Roger that."

Leaving those words behind, Mogwai vanished from the screen. Kojou let out a sigh as he returned the smartphone to his parka's pocket. The modified smartphone's battery charge was finally reaching a worrisome state.

"Nagisa is safe and sound, I take it?"

Yukina, sitting opposite Kojou, seemed to have posed the question to remind him of the fact. Seeing her look of relief, Kojou mixed a pained smile with a nod.

"Yeah, everyone seems more or less all right."

Seems Dad almost bought it, though, he added in his mind.

It was then that the girl called Yuiri rushed to Kojou's and Yukina's side, bowing her head. She was practically prostrating herself before them.

"I'm very sorry!"

"Eh?"

Kojou was taken aback as he looked at the girl.

Yui was a bit taller than Yukina. Her hair reached her shoulders, and she gave off the impression of an honors student, perhaps because of the forelocks framing the sides of her face. Quite unlike his initial perception of her, she was overly serious and prone to fiercely set her mind on something. He couldn't help but be reminded of Yukina.

In self-reproach, Yuiri said, "Really, I was the one who was supposed to be protecting your little sister, but I lost sight of her...and Nagisa faced danger

because of that—”

“Y-yeah... But she ended up safe and sound, so...,” Kojou replied, a little perplexed.

“No, I was woefully insufficient. I am very sorry.”

Yui bowed her head deeply. Conflicted, Kojou shook his own head as he turned to Yukina.

“Hey, Himeragi... Is she really in the Lion King Agency?”

“Yes. She is in the year above me, a particularly exceptional Sword Shaman candidate.”

“Oh. That’s kinda surprising.”

“In what way?” Yukina inclined her head a little, blinking curiously as she stared.

“Hmmm,” went Kojou, seriously mulling the issue over when he said, “Nah, I was just thinking, she has her head screwed on pretty straight for someone involved with the Lion King Agency.”

“I’m sorry?”

He felt like there was an audible *krik* as Yukina’s cheek twitched.

“Are you somehow implying...I have some kind of personality issue?”

When Yukina replied with half-lidded eyes, Kojou stuttered a “Well, you know” as he twisted his lips and gave an assenting nod.

“The people in the Lion King Agency who I know pretty much all tried to kill me the first time they met me, you know? First you, then Kirasaka, then that Paper Noise chick just the other day—”

“A-at the time, it was because you looked at me with indecent eyes, senpai —!”

“I did not! That was an accident—a total accident!”

Yui watched the raggedly voiced argument between Kojou and Yukina, her face full of surprise. Her mental image of the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor crumbled away—so said her face, at least.

As Yuiri, at a loss, stood rooted to the spot, a tiny figure rushed toward her. It was the dragon girl, her long silver hair fluttering behind her.

“Yuiriii!”

“Glenda? What happened? Where did you get those clothes...?”

Yuiiri’s eyes widened as Glenda leaped and embraced her, nearly bowling her over.

Glenda was wearing a large military jacket and combat boots, accentuated by earmuffs.

“We went ahead and had her pick from the stuff we had left over.”

Along with Glenda, the Oceanus Girls had returned. Yuiri had an almost frightened look, bowing her head to the troupe of beautiful girls of uncertain nationality.

“Th-thank you very much,” Yuiri said. “They look good on you, Glenda.”

“Eh-heh-heh.”

Praised by Yuiri, Glenda narrowed her eyes and smiled happily. It was an unbelievably adorable smiling face for a girl who’d been an enormous dragon not long ago.

“Um, incidentally, who are all of you...?”

With the dragon girl still coiled all about her, Yuiri regarded the Oceanus Girls. It was an obvious question to ask.

“I have been most rude,” said the beautiful blonde in the red bandanna, elegantly curtsying in her military fatigues. “Forgive my late introduction. I am the Fourth Primogenitor’s wife.”

“What?!”

Yuiiri blinked hard and her jaw dropped open, the unexpected answer rendering her speechless.

With calm, collected faces, the four remaining foreign-born girls smiled and revealed their relationships with Kojou one after the other:

“Similarly, I am his concubine.”

“Lover.”

“Sex buddy.”

“Harem member, you could say...”

“Huh?! Wha...?!”

Yui was so surprised that her head was like a swivel as she looked between the girls’ faces and Kojou’s.

Kojou, unexpectedly finding himself the victim of slander, hastily wedged himself into Yui’s exchange with the Oceanus Girls and insisted, “Don’t believe them! It’s not like that, not one little bit!!”

“B-but the Fourth Primogenitor could have five or six wives or lovers, and no one would—”

“I said it’s not like that! Himeragi, say something, please!”

Kojou sought aid from Yukina, believing she should establish his innocence. However, Yukina simply shook her head in an emotionless sulk.

“I am merely your observer. I have an abnormal personality after all.”

“You’re still mad about that?!”

His last hope cut away, Kojou clutched his head and made an exaggerated wail.

For a while, Yui stared at the panicked Kojou in amazement until finally, unable to bear it any longer, she let out laughter in a giggly voice.

“Yui?” Yukina meekly addressed Yui out of apparent concern.

Yui laughed as she shook her head and said, “Nothing, I was just thinking, Kojou really is like him. He really is Gajou’s son.”

In an instant, the corners of Kojou’s lips twisted in deep annoyance.

“Ah?!”

“Wahh, I’m sorry. B-but if I call you by your family names, I’ll mix you up with Gajou so, ah... Sorry.”

Yui hastily apologized. She apparently misunderstood, thinking Kojou was

angry she had addressed him by his first name in an overly familiar manner.

“No, no,” said Kojou, waving a hand in front of his face. “Nah, I just mean, I’m nothing like that guy. I’m not worried about how you say my name at all.”

“Is—is that so? Ah, er, I see. Sorry. You can address me by my given name as well, so...”

When Yuiri immediately gave a proper apology, Kojou muttered “Ahhh,” making a lukewarm nod. “She really is super normal...in spite of being in the Lion King Agency.”

Yukina simply stared. “Just what, exactly, do I seem like to you?”

I’d better change the subject before her mood gets even worse, thought Kojou, instantly averting his eyes and looking toward Glenda as she clung onto Yuiri.

“So we have some questions, too, like...who is that girl?”

“I do not know the details myself. I only learned just earlier that she calls herself Glenda...”

Yuri furrowed her brows as she spoke. She herself seemed perplexed as to why the mystery girl had become so fond of her, seemingly for no reason.

However, Glenda had approached and granted Yuiri her unconditional trust. Perhaps it was because she detected no hostility, and when their eyes met, she returned Kojou and the others’ looks with smiles, too. Kojou felt like he was watching a friendly little critter.

It was this Glenda who twitched her ears and began making a low growl. She was glaring in the direction of the mountain road that continued to Kannawa Lake.

“Yuri, they’re coming. Again.”

“Eh?”

Glenda’s words were followed by a short pause; then Kojou heard a deep sound of engines. Three SDF armored vehicles were heading toward Kojou and the others. When the armored vehicles stopped, an armed group in camouflage fatigues disembarked. Yuiri moved to shield Glenda as the apparent squad

leader approached.

“Attack Mage Haba of the Lion King Agency, I presume?”

The squad leader posed the question to Yuiri in a nominal show of politeness.

“I am First Lieutenant Ueyanagi, Second Company, SDF Special Attack Mage Regiment. Major Azama ordered us to escort you due to receiving a report that a unit retreating while carrying wounded came under attack by a dragon.”

“Attack by a dragon...?”

Yuri's eyes widened in visible surprise.

“No, that's wrong. It wasn't the dragon who attacked us. If anything, I'd say it was she who saved us—”

“Yuri...”

Glenda called out to Yuri in a frightened voice.

Without a word, the troops behind First Lieutenant Ueyanagi raised their firearms. These were Personal Defense Weapons used exclusively by Special Attack Mages. As this made Yuri's face stiffen, Ueyanagi stated to her with a highly coercive tone:

“We are in command here, Attack Mage Haba. Please hand *Glenda* over to us.”

His voice was filled with hostility.

4

“What do you think you are doing, Attack Mage Hikawa?”

Azama calmly posed the question right back at Shio, still aiming at him with her recurve bow. It was valor worthy of the field commander of the Special Attack Mages.

But even so, Shio's aim did not waver.

“I had a bad feeling from the start. Everything about this operation was strange.”

Shio made the statement with calmness in her voice that surprised even her.

Iblisveil gazed at the exchange between Shio and the officer with an expression of delight.

“The Lion King Agency seals sorcerous disasters away every day before breakfast. Even a single Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency possesses the power to destroy the World’s Mightiest Vampire—yet, I find it strange why, this time only, we needed to borrow the strength of the Self-Defense Forces out of fear of demon beasts that have never appeared before. I don’t understand the reason you were involved in such a dangerous operation.”

“...We are merely cooperating with the Lion King Agency. In point of fact, even the Lion King Agency’s Attack Mages cannot cope with the large numbers of houda that have appeared, yes?”

Azama was composed as he rebutted. Shio could accept that the explanation made sense. That was why Shio had not harbored any doubts about the presence of the SDF up to that point.

“I suppose not. At first, I thought that myself, so I accepted it. But, Major Azama, your unit was fragile against the demon beasts. No, rather, it was *too* fragile.”

Shio kept an eye on the wounded soldiers as she spoke.

The houda were powerful demon beasts, but not beyond the capabilities of Shio and the others to deal with. She certainly didn’t think they were powerful enough to overwhelm SDF Special Attack Mages to such an extent. But that would only remain true if the Special Attack Mages in question were in tip-top shape.

“The reason is simple. Your unit was not equipped with enough gear to deal with a swarm of houda. Thanks to that, you were simply overwhelmed by superior firepower. Is that not unnatural? Even though you were encircling Kannawa Lake, on guard for the appearance of demon beasts, you had a visible lack of equipment to deal with them.”

“Unfortunately...our activities are constantly under budgetary constraints, and the plan came with uncertain elements. It was never anticipated that there would be such a large outbreak of houda.”

“If that is the case, *what, exactly, did you expect to come out*, Major Azama?” Shio rebutted in a gentle voice.

That instant, Shio detected that Azama’s expression had gone faintly awry.

The houda were demon beasts that had appeared with the dragon. The swarm of houda nested around Avalon like birds gathering on the backs of elephants and water buffalo, seeking the protection of the mighty beast.

That was what had thrown Azama’s plan into chaos. The large outbreak of houda was a wild card to Azama and the Lion King Agency alike.

“Or rather, did you know from the very beginning that there was a dragon sleeping inside Avalon? That is why you had your subordinates on standby around Kannawa Lake—to determine the position where the dragon would emerge faster than the Lion King Agency could.”

Azama did not reply to Shio’s assertion, merely shifting a dark gaze toward her instead.

Had there not been the large houda outbreak, Azama would likely have determined the dragon’s whereabouts with ease. Furthermore, his comrades were no doubt attempting to capture the dragon. After all, the Special Attack Mages had not been granted weapons with which to take down a dragon. It was none other than Azama who had equipped them as such.

“I get it now. You didn’t equip your troops with powerful anti-demon beast weapons...and that’s why the SDF was in such a hard fight with small-fry demon beasts. It wouldn’t do for your men to steal your prey before you captured the dragon yourself.”

“Heh-heh.” A laugh rose from the back of Gajou Akatsuki’s throat. “Pursuing the dragon from the start explains why you dragged Nagisa along to be the sacrifice this time around. It just happened that Nagisa was the only one who fit the bill for the sacrifice that’d wake the dragon up. Mind finally telling us who was pulling the strings and feeding you that info?”

Gajou spoke in a defiant tone, perhaps having a very good idea who the mastermind was.

Shio nodded a little, in agreement. Even within the government, there were

few people with the clout to put the Lion King Agency into motion against a blood relation of Kojou Akatsuki, the “Fourth Primogenitor.” Through Azama, this individual had used not only the Self-Defense Forces, but the Lion King Agency as well. If they put Azama in irons, finding that individual ought to not be such a difficult task.

“I genuinely do not understand what you two are trying to say, but...”

However, Azama gave Shio a look of visible scorn. Shio’s words were speculation without any tangible proof behind them. Knowing this, his expression seemed one of mocking laughter.

“I, too, have heard the eyewitness reports of a dragon. However, even if I was to capture it, just what would I do with it?”

“That is obvious.”

It was not Shio who replied to Azama’s question, but Iblisveil.

“A dragon is the guardian of a treasure. It has always been the job of a knight to slay the dragon and take its treasure—is that not so, Knight of Cain?”

“I’ve had quite enough of this—”

Azama spoke, interrupting Iblisveil’s words. “If you wish to make a complaint, file it in accordance with proper procedure, but I am the operational commander here. Here and now, Attack Mage Hikawa, you *will* obey my commands—if you resist, I will simply have you all arrested.”

Even if she distrusted Azama’s true motives, the orders of a commanding officer were absolute. The troops surrounding Shio and the others followed Azama’s instructions, training their personal defense weapons on them all at once.

Shio clenched her teeth as she lowered her bow. She feared that engaging in foolish defiance would drag the wounded Gajou into it.

“A mere human—arrest *me*, you say? A poor attempt at humor. You are more suitable for the role of jester than knight.” Iblisveil’s shoulders shook as he laughed.

Azama drew his pistol and trained its barrel upon the vampire prince.

The ammunition of a pistol wielded by a Special Attack Mage was likely to be a silver and gold alloy of electrum anti-demon bullets. Even a vampire would not escape a direct hit unscathed. Even so, Iblisveil's raucous laughter did not cease.

"You will stay where you are. Or would a vampire of the Warlord's Empire launch an attack on Japan's Self-Defense Forces?"

"Oh-ho," went Iblisveil, raising his eyebrows with interest when he heard Azama's warning. "Your mask has slipped, jester. Why do you believe I hail from the Warlord's Empire?"

"...That's because..."

Azama's words trailed off as if he realized his own mistake. The hand gripping his pistol trembled.

Shio was half beside herself as she stared at the bandage wrapped around Azama's arm.

"Is it because you saw me with Dimitrie Vattler, perhaps? Unlike that damnable Master of Serpents, I am no showboat, and few know the face of Iblisveil Aziz beyond the borders of my nation. The mistake is understandable—but why did you know I was together with Vattler in the first place?" Iblisveil's smile widened. "Beyond the two of us, there was but a single eyewitness present—the Cleansers' Knight of Cain. Perhaps you should reminisce upon who, exactly, carved those wounds into your flesh?"

"Ugh..." Azama's expression contorted. His hand subconsciously touched the bandage on his arm.

This was the scar he had received from Iblisveil's Beast Vassal—incontrovertible proof that Azama and the Knight of the Sinful God were one and the same.

"This is my last warning, Attack Mage Hikawa. Drop your weapon and surrender," Azama commanded, his cheek twitching.

It was an unexpected individual's voice that belayed the order:

"That will not be necessary, Shio Hikawa."

The frail voice of a certain girl came from an SDF soldier behind Azama. Simultaneously, the other troops all trained their PDWs on Azama.

“—?!”

“That is because the order is invalid. Former Major Azama—I hereby relieve you of duty, along with the other Cleansers under you.”

“Controlling entire human bodies through spirit threads...Shirona Kuraki?!”

Whatever composure Azama still had vanished in an instant.

This was the *teokratia* of Shirona Kuraki, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency—by pouring down countless invisible spirit threads from the heavens, she cruelly controlled the dozens of SDF troops like marionettes on her strings.

“How did it feel to use the Lion King Agency, Tatsumi Azama?”

In unison, the girl’s voice coursed from the mouths of the SDF troops whose flesh she had hijacked.

“Then, it is only fitting that I return the favor. Beyond removing the threat from Kannawa Lake, I had one additional objective: smoking out the Cleansers who infiltrated the Self-Defense Forces.”

“Meaning—you used the dragon as bait with the intention of hunting us. So you, too, knew just what was lying inside of Avalon...”

Azama tossed his raised pistol down to his feet, and Shio thought this was what elicited laughter from Shirona.

“Any information obtainable by mere Cleansers could never escape the priests serving Kamioda Temple since ancient times. Indeed, it is why Hisano approved of a ceremony bringing such risk to Nagisa Akatsuki.”

“I see... But none of that matters anymore. Whatever your objective, using a genuine dragon as a decoy was your undoing, Lion King Agency...,” Azama murmured, back to acting composed.

Shio shuddered. That instant, she felt an instinctive fear and looked behind her back. The pilot of the red robot tank was shouting into the external speakers at maximum volume.

“Enemy approaching! All hands, protect thyelves!”

“—What?!”

In unison, expressions of shock came over the troops under Shirona’s control.

Along with an ear-splitting roar, two wyverns glided through the air at an extremely low altitude. Sitting on the back of one was Special Captain Mikage Okiyama, supposedly back at the operational HQ. Though she was wearing camouflaged fatigues, she had a strange-looking piece of clothing over it: a gunmetal-colored magic user’s robe—

“Captain Okiyama?! Don’t tell me you’re involved in this, too—?!”

Shio shouted as she moved to defend Gajou as he lay on top of the army cot. Apparently, it was not just Azama, the operational commander, with the Cleansers, but Okiyama, his aide-de-camp, as well.

Before Shio’s panicked eyes, Azama leaped onto a wyvern and receded into the distance.

“So there are two wyverns... Quite an amusing turn of events.”

Iblisveil muttered to himself, making a ferocious smile as he watched Azama and Okiyama fly off. From his point of view, Azama’s betrayal and the Lion King Agency’s position were someone else’s problems.

Asagi Aiba poked her head out of the robot tank’s hatch, stating to the vampire prince, “Iblis, we know where the dragon is. Kojou’s with it, too.”

She was holding what was apparently her personal pink smartphone in her hand.

“Understood... After them, then. Lead the way, Asagi.”

Speaking those words, Iblisveil climbed up one of the tank’s legs. The robot tank turned on a dime, setting off with ferocious speed as it left Shio and Gajou behind. They apparently meant to chase after Azama and Okiyama.

“Yuri...”

Shio, left in the dust, murmured the name of her close friend in a subdued voice.

Considering the circumstances, the odds of Yuiri being at the dragon's side was high. As things were, the odds were very high that she would most likely come into contact with Azama.

However, as she was, Shio had no remaining means by which to help Yuiri.

"It's all right. We can leave the rest to them."

"Gajou Akatsuki..."

Gajou stroked Shio's head, perhaps considerate because of the tearful look that had come over her.

He was wounded. It would be a trivial matter to brush his hand away, but for some reason, Shio did not. Perhaps it was because his all-too-friendly hand conveyed a warmth that made her feel strangely at ease.

"You did good, Shio."

Gajou spoke with the tone of one consoling a young girl.

Shio silently nodded, her cheeks reddening in an obvious blush.

5

"...Hand Glenda over, you say?"

Kojou Akatsuki's shoulders slumped as he looked back at the hulking soldier—First Lieutenant Ueyanagi.

Yui Haba was still shielding the dragon girl, her eyes opening wide in surprise as Kojou wedged himself into the conversation.

"Hey, I want to ask you one question. Why do you know that the dragon's name is Glenda? She only finally told her name to the girl looking after her a little while ago, right?"

Kojou peered into Yuiri's eyes as if making sure.

Yui bit her lip and nodded. The only ones who knew Glenda's name were Yuiri and the SDF troops riding the truck that had attacked them. Ueyanagi shouldn't have had any opportunity to have learned Glenda's name.

"Even if you had intel there was a dragon in the form of a girl...there's a bunch

of girls here who look way more suspicious than any dragon. So how did you know which one was Glenda right away?”

As Kojou spoke, he eyed the various Oceanus Girls—a mysterious group of beautiful girls differing in age, nationality, and hair type. Armed with firearms, the entire bunch were a lot more out of place than Glenda. On top of that, they were wearing the same type of camouflaged military jacket as Glenda. It was a near impossibility to tell the real Glenda from them by appearance alone.

That they could do so nonetheless meant they knew minute details about Glenda’s appearance from the start. In other words, they were allies of the gunmetal magician.

“You little brat.” Ueyanagi’s face contorted in rage as he glared at Kojou. “So you are the Fourth Primogenitor that Captain Okiyama reported about. I was told to avoid engaging you if at all possible, but under the circumstances, we have little choice.”

In a natural, nonchalant manner, Ueyanagi raised his right hand, as if sending a signal to all present.

That instant, Yuiri drew her sword from her back. Yuiri could plainly see someone sniping at Kojou’s face, blowing his head away. However, before that premonition could become fact, Yuiri’s sword swatted down the flying bullet.

This was Yuiri’s Future Sight, the ability to peer a moment into the future that the Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency possessed—

“Whoa?!” Kojou exclaimed in surprise as he saw sparks scatter right before his eyes.

By that time, Yukina had tossed a metallic spell scroll aloft; this changed into a silver wolf that assaulted the sniper. Yukina, seeing into the future that the sniping attack would be blocked, moved ahead of even that. Yuiri curled her tongue at the astounding talent typical of Yukina.

“Yukii!”

“Yes, Yuiri!”

All at once, Ueyanagi’s subordinates put their fingers on their triggers.

However, their attacks never reached Kojou or the others, for Yuiri and Yukina had already leaped above Ueyanagi's men's heads, launching a simultaneous surprise attack.

The fact the men had surrounded them made them brittle against attack from within. They could not fire freely out of fear of hitting allies, allowing Yuiri and Yukina to strike them down with the ease of slicing bundles of straw.

The pair moved in concert, almost as if they knew exactly what the other would do in advance; the troops could not keep up. With the two Sword Shamans' ferocious attacks showering down on them, the number of Ueyanagi's men was whittled down in the blink of an eye.

"S-so strong..." Kojou muttered in a daze.

The individual combat capability of an SDF Special Attack Mage unit's members was far from low. But in addition to the element of surprise, underestimating Yuiri and Yukina as little girls was surely a factor. Unable to resist to the extent they desired, they were neutralized one after another.

Perhaps Kojou should have seen Ueyanagi being the last to remain unscathed as small surprise.

"...O God, God of mine, grant unto me the Power of Retribution—"

Ueyanagi rushed to his wheeled armored vehicle as he pulled an odd-looking device out from his hip pouch. This was a gunmetal gauntlet—the kind of gauntlet a knight from the Middle Ages would be wearing.

The instant Ueyanagi touched the gauntlet, the contours of the wheeled armored vehicle changed.

The metallic armor flowed as if melting, transforming into the form of a beetle. It looked just like the humanoid golems the gunmetal magic user had employed.



“That’s...?!”

“Yukii, stand back!”

Yuii shoved the bewildered Yukina aside, advancing to the front. Yukina’s Schneewaltzer could not breach the defenses of an armored vehicle. Destroying inorganic objects was Rosen Chevalier Plus’s domain.

“Eh?!”

But the instant she touched the black membrane enveloping the armored vehicle, an unpleasant sound like glass shattering rang out, and Shio’s sword bounced off. It was indeed the same as against the golems. Rosen Chevalier Plus’s pseudo-spatial severing had been nullified.

“Oh n—!”

With Yuii thrown off-balance, the monster that had once been an armored vehicle rose before her eyes.

As Yuii fell, it continued its ascent. Its enormous foreleg swung upward, hurtling down to trample Yuii.

She desperately leaped back, but the monster’s movements were far faster than she had expected. The attack’s reach was simply too great.

“Al-Meissa Mercury—!”

It was the Beast Vassal summoned by Kojou that saved Yuii in that moment of mortal peril.

The intertwined, two-headed quicksilver dragon opened its enormous maws and assailed the gunmetal beetle. However...

“What the—?!” Kojou cried out, shocked.

—the two-headed dragon’s attack, supposedly able to gouge out space itself, bounced off just short of reaching the beetle’s armor.

The impact from the collision sent the giant beetle flying, but its surface was nearly unscathed. Kojou’s Beast Vassal had not consumed it. It had a demonic energy-nullifying ability, just like the gunmetal magic user’s wyvern.

“Get down, please—!”

As Kojou and Yuiri were rebuffed, they suddenly heard a lighthearted voice from behind them. Instantly, Kojou ducked, whereupon something raced overhead with incredible force.

When Kojou turned around, he saw one of the Oceanus Girls, wearing a yellow beret and holding a metal cylinder—an anti-tank rocket launcher.

“The hell?!”

Before Yuiri’s and Kojou’s astonished eyes, the resulting explosion engulfed the beetle, sending it tumbling onto its side.

The black membrane that nullified magical energies had no effect on a pure ranged weapon. The high-explosive, squash-head rocket, intended to blast through tank armor even from the front, easily punched straight through the beetle’s outer shell and exploded within.

“Ugh... The information... My information...!”

Ueyanagi, spat out from the beetle’s innards in the process, put a hand onto his own tattered arm to staunch the bleeding. The black fluid coursing from his flesh resembled oil. Pale rays scattered from it, melting into nothingness before they fell to the ground. The gunmetal gauntlet Ueyanagi wore was transforming his flesh into some kind of inhuman *thing*.

“What’s with this guy...? Doesn’t he feel pain...?!”

“He’s from the Cleansers, Fourth Primogenitor.”

From behind the shaken Kojou, the Oceanus Girl with the white ribbon answered his question.

“Cleansers?”

“Please think of them as a terrorist group known to use special sorcerous devices.”

“Sorcerous devices...! You mean like that Zenforce bunch used...?!”

Kojou exclaimed in response to the explanation continued by the girl with the black ribbon.

“Yes. The sorcerous devices they employ are relics of The Cleansing.”

“Most are crude duplicates and pieces of junk, but please be careful—”

“Yeah, got it.” He nodded in response to the girls’ warnings. He murmured to himself, “This isn’t good.”

Once before, Kojou and Yukina had fought soldiers with sorcerous devices implanted within their bodies. They, known as Sorcerous Troopers, had obtained immortal bodies and combat capabilities sufficient to overwhelm any ordinary demon.

Ueyanagi’s sorcerous device, able to alter machines to create golems, was a vile thing on par with those of the Sorcerous Troopers. Even if Kojou summoned a Beast Vassal, half-hearted attacks wouldn’t bust through. That said, if he launched an attack sufficient to surpass the demonic energy-nullification ability of his sorcerous device, it’d kill Ueyanagi for sure.

The foe was a tough match for Kojou, whose Beast Vassals were difficult to control at the best of times.

“Shit... I won’t... I won’t forgive you for this...!”

“The hell...?!”

As Kojou and the others hesitated, Ueyanagi approached the armored vehicles a second time right before their eyes. He fused the two remaining armored vehicles together to create a new golem. He’d likely sacrificed offensive power in favor of a fortified defense. It was a reptile resembling the ankylosaurus of times long past.

The Oceanus Girl in yellow fired her anti-tank rocket launcher once more. The remaining four fired their respective weapons, anti-materiel rifles and recoilless rifles. All were powerful weapons able to one-shot a normal demon.

However, Ueyanagi’s ankylosaurus calmly shrugged off their attacks.

“That guy... He kept the toughness from the armored vehicles, then...”

Kojou remembered that Ueyanagi had spoken the word *information*.

Maybe that sorcerous device isn’t just for turning machines into golems, Kojou pondered. The golems Ueyanagi created possessed the same abilities and characteristics as the armored vehicles—in other words, the newly created

creatures were imbued with those properties.

The sorcerous device transformed manufactured goods into living creatures. Machine had been replaced wholesale with life. The device was well beyond the understanding of human beings. Only the possessions of the gods made such a thing possible.

That was the truth behind the gunmetal weapons employed by the Cleansers—they were sorcerous devices of the sinful god. One might call the transformation of Ueyanagi's body into something inhuman the price he paid for using such a device.

If he continued to use the device, at some point, he would no doubt cease to be human.

“Senpai.”

Yukina adopted a familiar pose as she looked at Kojou.

Yui raised an eyebrow. Perhaps she was unable to immediately understand what the younger Sword Shaman meant to do.

“Himeragi? Oh, I get it.”

However, Kojou understood everything she had planned the instant their eyes met. There was no need to work out the timing or even give a signal. They used the opening created by the huge ankylosaurus turning about to launch a simultaneous attack.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

Yukina's spear dissipated the pitch-black membrane covering the ankylosaurus's surface.

It was the same as during the Black Bible Incident. Through the Divine Oscillation Effect of Snowdrift Wolf, able to rend any barrier, the field able to nullify demonic energy was nullified itself.

“*What?!*”

Ueyanagi, his own flesh half-fused with the ankylosaurus, exclaimed in shock as his movements came to a halt. When he did so, a new Beast Vassal emerged right before Ueyanagi's eyes. This was a scarlet bicorn, a dense, mirage-like

distortion in the air that was vibration and blast wind incarnate.

“C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium—!”

The bicorn bellowed, echoing its master’s fighting spirit.

The super-oscillation of its hooves, able to bring a skyscraper crashing down, pulverized the ankylosaurus’s carapace. Before the might of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, the two armored vehicles’ defense was as brittle as a candy cane.

The golem shattered into such fine pieces that it was unrecognizable, leaving the metal-fused Ueyanagi to be thrown to the ground on his own.

“Ugh... A mere demon, doing this to me...”

Fluid resembling oil poured out of Ueyanagi as he glared at Kojou. His flesh, half-merged with machinery, seemed no longer able to move on its own power. However he burned with hatred, it was surely beyond him to fight any further.

“Sheesh,” Kojou grumbled, shaking his head as he moved to release the bicorn from its summons.

“—Kojou!” Yuiri sharply warned.

She was staring above the bicorn’s head.

A gunmetal wyvern spread its wings high above, dive-bombing toward Kojou’s Beast Vassal.

The collision with the wyvern shrouded in a pitch-black aura greatly staggered the scarlet bicorn. Kojou’s Beast Vassal was not harmed. But thanks to the black veil that nullified demonic energy, it had been rendered unable to move freely. Riding upon the wyvern’s back was the gunmetal magic user who’d assaulted Yuiri and the others to start with.

“The cosplay lady from earlier!”

“Not just her, senpai! There’s another one coming!”

“Huh...?!”

Just as Yukina had indicated, there were two wyverns flying over. During the time the first wyvern held Kojou’s Beast Vassal in check, the other glided over

the surface of the ground to land right at Ueyanagi's side. The second was ridden by a tall man encased in iron-colored knight's armor.

"Major Azama!"

Ueyanagi let out a cry of delight, seemingly in awe of the knight of iron. His words were a hard jolt to Kojou and the others, for it was the name of the SDF commanding officer who had come out during the negotiations between Yuiri and Ueyanagi.

"Thank you for the reinforcements, Major! Please, grant me information, stronger information—"

As Kojou and the others shot them bewildered gazes, Ueyanagi extended a hand toward the iron knight, clinging to him for support.

Azama, his entire body clad in knightly plate, gazed down at Ueyanagi with vacant eyes.

"You have done well to halt Glenda in her tracks, First Lieutenant Ueyanagi."

His voice bereft of emotion, he turned the lance in his hand toward Ueyanagi. Then, without warning, he plunged the polished tip of his lance through Ueyanagi's chest.

"Ah?"

Ueyanagi looked down at the lance impaling his own chest with a dumbfounded expression.

Then, his entire body became countless points of glowing light as the lance began to absorb him.

"Ma...jor? Why...?"

"The power of your incomplete sorcerous device can do more. I shall now end your suffering."

Ueyanagi's body dissipated before he could hear the last of Azama's words. Having been transformed into the "information" that their kind referred to, he was consumed by Azama's lance.

"Ah... Aaah..."

Behind Kojou and the others, shock rendered the steel-haired girl speechless before she let out a scream.

“Noooooooooooooooo!!”

“Glenda?!”

With a fierce panic seizing the young girl, Yuiri desperately tried to calm her down. Judging that they were both in danger, Kojou and Yukina raced toward the flustered pair.

“Calm down, Glenda! What has you all—? Whoaaaa!”

Kojou was struck by a blow of incredible force the instant he put his hand on her shoulder. The military jacket she was wearing ripped apart as Glenda’s body suddenly swelled up and increased in mass dozens of times over—she was transforming into a dragon.

“S-senpai!”

“Take my hand, Himeragi!”

Kojou desperately stretched his arm toward Yukina, who was in danger of being shaken off from Glenda’s back.

The instant he somehow managed to grasp Yukina’s slender wrist, Kojou and the others were struck by ferocious acceleration that made it feel like their innards would burst out of their chests.

Enormous wings imbued with magical energy spread above Kojou and company’s heads. Ignoring all laws of physics, the dragon-ized Glenda powerfully accelerated as she soared up into the sky.

“Nooooo! Glenda, you idiooooot!” Yuiri, held by the dragon’s front claw, was half in tears as she shouted.

His breath caught as he was buffeted by violent winds, Kojou stared at the receding ground below in astonishment.

Intermission iv

Dimitrie Vattler was standing in a camp that was closed due to it being off-season.

Vestiges of incredible destruction extended all around him. White smoke slowly rose from the vast wreckage of golems created from the components of armored vehicles and other modern weaponry that lay around him.

Vattler had raided the camp, adopted as a base by a Cleansers support unit, all by himself. Around that time, Kira Lebedev and Tobias Jagan ought to have been smashing other hideouts.

Superficially, this meant he was cooperating with the Lion King Agency; this was hardly his objective. Naturally, he was attacking the Cleansers for reasons of his very own.

Of course, battling enemies with special sorcerous devices was one of those reasons. In the end, just as he had expected, this had resulted in a one-sided thrashing, but...

“It would seem you amused yourself, Duke Ardeal,” a clear voice said to Vattler as he inspected the remains of a golem he had destroyed.

It was La Folia Rihavein—the beautiful princess of the Kingdom of Aldegia.

“Well, well. To think you would come in person, Princess. You are here for their sorcerous devices?”

Vattler replied in a theatrical tone as he leaned down then and there. Adopting the manner of a faithful knight toward his liege, he presented something before La Folia. It was a gunmetal-colored rod—old and half-destroyed.

“If it pleases you, I shall offer it to you. Go ahead. It is to commemorate our reunion.”

“A sorcerous device of Nod... So it is indeed a replica.”

La Folia accepted the broken wand from the hand of the vampire aristocrat and gazed at it with deep interest.

Vattler brushed off the sleeve of his coat and stood back up as if nothing had happened.

“It has already ceased to operate. Even so, it may yet prove useful if you analyze it.”

“I suppose so. You have my thanks, Dimitrie Vattler.”

La Folia called up one of the escorts standing behind her and handed the broken wand over to her.

“Oh my,” the princess then said, narrowing her eyes at something she apparently had not expected. She had located a survivor of the Cleansers in the shadow of a large, burned-out trailer.

The dark-green overalls the man wore marked him as a mechanic. However, half his body had already merged with the frame of the vehicle; he had ceased to be a human being. Black, oily fluid flowed out of the cracks along the surface of his flesh; the droplets continually turned into light that then dissipated.

If they left him like this, he would perish—no, he would simply cease to be. No trace would remain of him in the world on their side. Such was the fate of all who set their hands upon the sorcerous devices of Nod.

“Curse you, you sly fox! A princess of a nation, and you cavort with a filthy demon like this?!”

Wringing out the last of his strength, the man vented curses at La Folia.

However, the princess calmly shook her head with a look of pity for the man as she said, “It is you who seek destruction and slaughter for the sake of greed and hatred, who possess truly tainted souls.”

“Do not mock us, vixen... Our desire is to return the world to its proper form! A pure, egalitarian world where monsters like the two of you do not exist!”

The man bared his teeth as he bellowed.

As La Folia listened to the last his words, a gentle smile came over her lips.

A beautiful, cruel smile, like a frigid glacier.

“If you truly believe that sullying the earth with blood through the power of the Sinful God exiled from this world will bring about a pure, egalitarian world, it is rather precious of you.”

“What...?!”

“Rest at ease. I shall not allow you to perish. Not until you have told us every shred of intel that you know—”

“W-wait... What are...? ...Stop... St...!”

The man’s face contorted with fear when his movements halted, seemingly frozen in place.

The ring La Folia wore on her right hand was giving off a transparent blue glow.

This was a high-end freezing magic from the Kingdom of Aldegia, proud of its sorcerous technology. Though the scale was small, and the power was low, it was the same type of ability that Kanon Kanase had once employed when she had been transformed into a Faux-Angel. The man’s flesh destruction phenomenon caused by the sorcerous device of Nod was now stopped in its tracks.

Having watched the affair from start to finish, a satisfied smile came over Vattler once more.

To him, known as a battle maniac of rare fervor, the worth of others was measured solely by their worthiness as opponents. The Princess of Aldegia demonstrating only a small portion of her power had been sufficient to satisfy Vattler, putting him in a pleasant mood.

Knowing that she was the recipient of his warped sense of goodwill, La Folia pretended not to notice as she gazed at the remaining trailer. They were trailers for hauling and maintaining attack helicopters. However, there was no sign of the two attack helicopters the trailers had been hauling.

“I see... So they offered up the information of the combat helicopters to create the wyverns. That is the true power of the sorcerous devices of the Sinful

God?”

“So it would seem,” replied Vattler with a nod.

“However, they can freely control the power to some extent before Nod corrupts them. Thanks to His Highness Prince Aziz’s strenuous efforts, I have obtained valuable data.”

“The corruption of Nod... So it is a troublesome power even to vampires?”
The princess touched her hand to her lips.

Vattler shrugged his shoulders in amusement and asked, “Worried about Kojou, perhaps?”

“Mm, but of course. After all, he shall be my companion one day.”

La Folia replied in a serene tone from which no one could tell if she was joking or being earnest.

The female knights acting as bodyguards for the princess put hands to their foreheads with anguished expressions as Vattler smiled in ever-greater delight.

“However, there is one more thing that concerns me...”

“The Priestess of Cain?” Vattler carried on where the princess left off.

She nodded, her usual smile having vanished at some point.

“Yes. Though he knows that she is in this land, the Knight of the Sinful God has demonstrated no interest in her. For that matter, he has not even taken care to avoid involving her in the fighting.”

“I can think of two possibilities.”

Vattler pretentiously raised a pair of fingers, immediately bending one.

“They may not know of the Priestess of Cain’s existence. It is a rather rude thing to say about those calling themselves the Cleansers, but I cannot absolutely rule it out.”

“And the other possibility?”

La Folia elegantly inclined her head as she posed the question.

Vattler bent his second finger, a ferocious smile coming over him for a single

moment as he continued.

“There is *another* Priestess of Cain.”

“It can’t be—” La Folia’s voice trembled.

Vattler looked back upon the shaken princess with a satisfied smile, spreading his arms wide and looking up at the sky.

“So wonderful... Entertaining, is it not? Truly, that island is beloved by chaos...”



CHAPTER FIVE
RETURN FROM THE
FARTHEST REACHES

CHAPTER FIVE

RETURN FROM THE FARTHEST REACHES

1

There was a great beating of wings bathed in magical energy, sending the enormous dragon flying through the air.

Kojou, at the mercy of incessant shaking and violent winds, held on to the dragon's neck for dear life.

"Glenda, calm down! Where do you think you're going—?!"

Kojou desperately shouted, but his voice never reached the agitated Glenda's ears. Gripped by fear, the dragon girl had no destination in mind in her blind efforts to distance herself from the iron knight.

"Whoa—!"

Glenda's body violently swayed, buffeted by the air currents. The lurch threw Kojou heavily off-balance, sending his body sliding down. Instinctively, he reached out with his right hand to grab hold of the dragon's back and was in shock at the lack of feeling. That hand, numb from the wound left when Paper Noise impaled it, refused to move.

This is bad. Kojou groaned inwardly as he was struck by a fickle, floating feeling. *I'm gonna fall—!*

Just when Kojou resigned himself to that, someone grabbed his right arm.

"Senpai!"

Yukina's right hand gripped her silver spear, leaving only her left to support the weight of Kojou's tumbling body. Having used ritual energy to enhance her muscle strength to a reckless extent, she proceeded to haul up Kojou.

"Himeragi! Sorry, you saved my bacon!"

In frog-like fashion, Kojou crept up the dragon on all fours, reaching its shoulder once more. With neither able to use one of their hands, Yukina somehow managed to pull him into a stable stance right next to her.

“Please, hang on tight!”

“R-right. Er, but—”

The unfamiliar sensation pressing against his cheek caused Kojou to hem and haw.

“What is it?”

“Er, it’s just that your breasts are pushing against my face, Himeragi—”

Maybe we can shift this a bit, Kojou was about to say when an elbow struck the side of his face.

“I-idiot, I’m gonna fall. I’m gonna fall—!”

“It is because you said something indecent, senpai!”

With Kojou about to fall once more, Yukina grudgingly reached out with her hand.

Kojou’s cheek was swelling as he sluggishly shook his head and said:

“Right... What about that Yui girl?”

I haven’t heard her family name yet, he thought as he sought out the other Sword Shaman who should have been nearby.

When he meekly poked his head out over the large shoulder of Glenda, now in dragon form, his eyes caught sight of Yui in the clutches of the dragon’s front claw. The upper air currents were causing her uniform’s skirt to ride way up, dramatically showing off her thighs in tights.

In spite of this, Yui was unable to hide the sight behind a hand as she pleaded to Kojou with tearful eyes, “D-don’t look—!”

“...Seems like we’re all right.”

Seeing for himself that she was safe, Kojou returned to his previous stance. Yui didn’t exactly have it easy, but her life did not seem to be in imminent peril.

However, just as Kojou expressed relief, he felt Yukina's body stiffen right behind him.

"Not yet, senpai!"

"Huh...?"

Before Kojou could grasp the situation, the dragon shook from an enormous impact.

Glenda's dragon body writhed, letting out an anguished roar as she endured the pain.

A pitch-black sphere raced right past her.

That's a gunshot! Kojou realized. Someone pursuing Kojou and the others from behind had launched an attack on Glenda.

"The wyvern from before...!"

When Kojou looked back, the jet-black-colored wyvern was squarely in his sights. The man in armor was riding on its back. The female magic user was riding the other wyvern a little ways behind him.

The knight was couching his lance. Kojou realized that the shape of the weapon had changed; at that moment, it was more of an enormous rifle than a lance; it could change according to the characteristics of the machines it came into contact with.

The lance fired jet-black spheres as bullets.

Glenda couldn't evade the attacks with Kojou and the others aboard. The dragon girl howled as she soaked up gunshots all over her body.

"Miss Glenda—?!"

Yukina addressed Glenda with genuine concern. Perhaps that had done some good, for Glenda's panic abated, and Kojou and Yukina avoided the worst case of being flung off her back. But if the attacks persisted, Glenda's endurance would eventually falter.

"Sorry, Himeragi—keep me steady a little, okay?"

As he spoke, Kojou stood up on the dragon's uneven, rocking back.

Yukina's cheeks stiffened when she realized just what it was Kojou had in mind.

"Senpai, you mustn't. If you use a Beast Vassal, your wound will—"

"This ain't the time to hold anything back— C'mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!"

Kojou endured the pain hitting him from the backlash as he summoned a Beast Vassal. The air distorted as the incandescent bicorn emerged, howling as it unleashed a shock wave at the flying wyvern that resembled a cannonball.

However, the man in knightly plate—Azama—anticipated Kojou's counterattack. Undaunted, he spread out his pitch-black cloak, deploying a giant defensive membrane.

The scarlet bicorn's attack was, in fact, a mass of demonic energy in shock-wave form. This was why it generated vast destructive might, but in this case, that energy was a fatal flaw. The defensive barrier created by the knight nullified direct demonic energy attacks.

"Figures that Beast Vassal attacks wouldn't work... So how 'bout this?!"

A smile came over Kojou, visibly defiant as he made the scarlet bicorn raise its altitude.

Even if the Beast Vassal had managed a direct hit, it would not defeat that wyvern. On the other hand, the pitch-black aura shrouding them had been unable to fend off the anti-tank rocket launched by one of the Oceanus Girls. If the attack didn't rely on demonic energy, it was possible to inflict damage upon them.

Kojou made the Beast Vassal dive-bomb, aiming at the two wyverns dancing in the air below. Simultaneously, he completely released the Beast Vassal from its restraints, freeing it of all shackles on its concentrated demonic energy.

Unable to retain physical form, the bicorn transformed into a colossal mass of vibration and violent winds. It became a raging storm of countless tornadoes, agitating the atmosphere around it.

The precipitous change in air pressure made Kojou's eardrums creak.

Trees covering the surface of the ground were yanked out with their roots,

dancing in the air along with a large quantity of dirt.

It was truly a natural disaster—a calamity, even.

The overwhelming destruction was akin to carpet-bombing. The line of a mountain ridge was shaved off, with a rockslide down its stony surface as the terrain around them changed as they watched.

Violent winds gouged the ground below, covering an area rivaling a single city. Were it not an uninhabited area deep in the mountains, casualties would surely have been in the tens of thousands.

“Wh-what have you...?”

Yukina’s face went pale as she stared at the Beast Vassal’s rampage. It had been a while since Kojou beheld the true might of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor with his own eyes; he, too, was at a loss for words.

Had he unleashed such might in the skies over Itogami Island, the entire island would likely have been wiped out without a trace by that point. *Good thing I’m not stupid enough to try*, he thought, relieved to the bottom of his heart for that.

There was no way the wyverns ought to have been able to fly amid such violent winds and raging air currents. Even if they could nullify direct demonic energy hits, that would be no help against a stirred-up atmosphere.

Seeing for himself that Azama and the others had abandoned pursuit, Kojou released his Beast Vassal from its summons. However, once arisen, the tornadoes could not be affected by even Kojou’s will.

For a while, Kojou stared in amazement as they gouged the faces of the mountains and caused landslides, one after another. The scolding gaze from Yukina stabbing the side of his face stung bitterly. And then—

“Glenda...?”

The dragon’s body, presumably outside the range of the violent winds, suddenly lurched.

Perhaps it was the effect of her wounds. Perhaps her strength had simply been exhausted. Either way, Glenda had lost consciousness. The dragon’s

flapping wings lost their strength and were no longer able to support her enormous body.

Glenda was falling toward the earth, with Kojou and the others riding her along with it.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!”

Yui’s death-resigned scream echoed across the gray, wintry sky for quite some time.

2

She’d first heard the rumors about the Fourth Primogenitor a little before summer.

She’d heard that the Fourth Primogenitor was immoral and immutable, without any blood kin whatsoever, with no aspirations to rule, served by twelve Beast Vassals that were calamity incarnate—a cruel, heartless vampire who drank human blood, slaughtered, and destroyed, existing beyond all doctrines of the world.

If such a monster appeared in a nation of the world, would someone from the Lion King Agency not be dispatched to slay him? Thus, at High God Forest, a Lion King Agency training facility masquerading as a famous primary and secondary level all-girls school, such information spread in the blink of an eye, plunging the students into terror.

That said, it was an irresponsible, baseless rumor. With the same force with which the rumor had suddenly spread, the topic died away, and it was not long before it was consigned to oblivion.

It was during that time when Yui Haba heard about the Fourth Primogenitor from a most unexpected source: the lips of Koyomi Shizuka, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency.

From her, Yui learned that the Fourth Primogenitor was actually a high school student living on Itogami Island. Furthermore, because Yui was the same age, she had been nominated as a candidate for the Sword Shaman to be dispatched to watch him.

Those facts both surprised and scared her.

On the one hand, she felt a faint pang of hope.

If she was sent to watch over the Fourth Primogenitor, a boy, she might develop a romantic relationship with him—such was her sugary hope. Of her peers at the dormitory, no one beyond Shio Hikawa knew this, but Yuiri was an avid reader of romance manga catering to teenage girls.

But in the end, it was not Yuiri who had been selected to be the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor.

The reasons were extremely simple. One was that Yuiri could not skillfully employ a Schneewaltzer.

The Demon-Purging Assault Spear Type Seven, secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, could not be tuned to fit its user. Thanks to that, it was compatibility with the weapon, not the skill or abilities of the user, that determined whether someone would be able to master it. In point of fact, even Koyomi Shizuka apparently could not completely draw out a Schneewaltzer's true abilities.

The other reason Yuiri had not been selected was because Yuiri had not been an orphan.

Rare among the girls living at High God Forest, Yuiri still had living family. Both parents were office workers at the Lion King Agency, and she had a younger brother close to her in age.

Of course, Yuiri had no intention of becoming a Sword Shaman just to be the apple of her parents' eyes, but it was believed that Yuiri was spared being sent on highly dangerous missions, like being the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, out of consideration for her family.

Hence, even in the present, Yuiri felt indebted to Yukina.

If she'd only been able to use a Schneewaltzer a little better...and if only Yukina had family, like Yuiri did—

Then perhaps it would have been Yuiri who would have been assigned the dangerous mission of being the Fourth Primogenitor's watcher.

“Oh, you came to, er... Miss Yuiri?”

The lazy flickering of a firewood stove illuminated the room as that very Fourth Primogenitor called out to her.

Though the face of the boy was a far cry from the handsome image of a vampire primogenitor she'd drawn in her own mind, he was not without his charms. He was sitting with his legs spread on the floor of an unfamiliar building that was apparently some kind of log cabin.

"Kojou? Where is this? Where's Glenda...?!"

Yui slowly sat up as ambiguous memories trickled in. Immediately, she felt a dull pain running through her left arm. It was the wound from when the knight on the wyvern had attacked. Thanks to Glenda shielding her, the wound was not severe, but using her left hand to swing her sword seemed impractical for the time being.

Beyond that, she recalled being grabbed by the dragon Glenda's claw and hurtling toward the ground. Then, Yui's vision had been covered in silver mist right before hitting the ground.

To be precise, she'd been struck by the strange feeling that she herself had transformed into vapor. She also felt like she saw some kind of enormous shelled beast in the middle of the incredibly thick mist. Perhaps that had been one of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals.

Numerous vampires possessed the special ability to transform their own flesh into mist and move in that form, but she'd never heard of any phenomenon that turned not only the self into mist, but everyone and everything around him. This time, she'd somehow managed to regain her old form, but a shudder went through her at the thought of him losing control of his Beast Vassal.

That said, Yui and Glenda had been saved by Kojou again.

First, I have to thank him, thought Yui, but when she opened her mouth, a conflicted expression came over Kojou when he realized something, turning his face away.

"Um... Sorry. It'd be a big help if you could...cover up," Kojou mumbled, never permitting his eyes to meet hers.

"K...kyaaaaaaaaa!"

That instant, Yuiri shrieked when she realized she was not wearing her school uniform. Fortunately, she was still wearing her underwear, but that was no comfort to her whatsoever. It was her first experience exposing her flesh so blatantly in front of a boy. She'd never even let her younger brother see her like this.

“—Senpai, what did you do to Yuiri?!”

Yukina, hearing Yuiri's shriek, raced over from the middle of the log cabin with a rapid patter of steps and glared at Kojou.

Seeing Yuiri in just her underwear, Yukina sighed deeply, grasping the gist of the situation as she said, “Truly, I cannot turn my back on you for one second...”

“Hey, don't pin this on me!”

Kojou put a palm to his cheek as he rebutted, sulking. *Actually, it's not his fault*, Yuiri thought, but all that came to her lips was a frail smile.

Yukina looked at the bandage wrapped around Yuiri's left arm, inquiring in apparent concern, “Can you move, Yuiri? I applied first aid, but...”

Apparently, she'd been the one to strip Yuiri's uniform off.

“Thank you, Yukii. The wound's fine. More importantly, where is this...?”

“I believe it is a mountain cabin meant to receive mountain climbers. It appears to have been empty due to the Self-Defense Forces sealing the area.”

“That so...”

Yuri, seeing that Glenda was sleeping next to her safe and sound, exhaled in relief.

So Kojou and Yukina just happened to have located a cabin near the point of their crash and were able to carry Yuiri and Glenda to it. Judging from the brightness outside, Yuiri had probably been unconscious for two to three hours.

“A little bit longer, and Asagi...a friend of ours, will be coming to pick us up. Glenda can't move yet, either, so it's probably best we hide out here for the time being. It'll be nighttime soon, too.”

“Mm, I suppose so.”

After Yukina handed Yui her uniform, she turned her back to Kojou, dressing as she concurred with his opinion.

The gray-haired girl under the same blanket as Yui stirred, glomming on to Yui like a kitten doting on its mother.

“Hyui... Hyui...”

“Glenda, are your injuries all right?”

“Dah.”

When Glenda, perhaps not fully awake, addressed her with mysterious-sounding words, Yui stroked her hair. Becoming a dragon had sent Glenda’s clothes bursting apart once more, this time wrecking the ones that the Oceanus Girls had provided her. At the moment, the only thing she was wearing was the parka Kojou Akatsuki had been wearing until a short while before.

Dressed in the baggy clothing, Glenda had no dramatic wounds on her body; seeing this for herself, Yui patted her chest in relief.

“So...what is she anyway? Why’s Azama after her?” Kojou asked.

“I have no idea, either.” Yui weakly shook her head.

“Figures,” Kojou said, dejection visible in his eyes. After all, without knowing the reason Azama was after her, his next move couldn’t be predicted, and there were limits to how much they could protect Glenda.

In case it might help, Yui did explain all the circumstances before and after meeting Glenda to both of them, but the expressions on both Kojou’s and Yukina’s faces were conflicted. If Yui couldn’t understand what was going on, and she was actually there, the two of them had little hope of understanding it, either.

When she’d finished providing them with all the information she knew, a brief silence descended.

It was a low, bestial *rrrn* that broke the awkward silence.

This was the sound of Yui’s stomach, able to endure hunger no longer.

When Yui thought back, she hadn’t had a single bite to eat since that

morning. Glenda had robbed her of all her emergency ration biscuits. On top of that, she noticed that a nice scent was beginning to waft inside the mountain cabin. Something was boiling in the pot on top of the woodstove.

“There was food for emergencies left in the kitchen, so I thought I would try heating it...”

Yukina spoke in a reserved tone as she served the meal.

It was vegetable soup with a plethora of ingredients and a variety of sweets, like cookies and candy bars, on the side. For someone nearly collapsing from hunger, it was truly a sight to behold. When she glanced over, Glenda, still half-awake, immediately began munching on the biscuits.

“Thanks, Yukii. It kinda feels like I’m making you do all the work.”

“Not at all, Yuiri. You’ve been taking good care of Sayaka and me for ages. I’m glad I could do something to return the favor.”

“Ah-ha-ha. That’s because Kirasaka and Shio got into a lot of arguments...”

Yuii laughed with nostalgia as she brought soup to her lips. Shio Hikawa and Sayaka Kirasaka were both headstrong girls as well as Shamanic War Dancer candidates of the same grade, leading them to compete on every front. It was usually Yuiri, in the same class, or Yukina who ended up having to deal with the consequences.

“I see... Yuiri, you’ve known Himeragi since you were little kids, huh?” Kojou asked, mystified.

Yukina had difficulty speaking about her past. A slight blush came over her as she hung her head a little and said, “I suppose so. Although, we were not in the same grade and had few chances to speak directly with each other...”

“Come to think of it, no one talked to Yukii all that much. She was kind of unapproachable; she was levelheaded since she was really little; and she was a little scary during mock combat, you see...”

With her beautiful junior right before her eyes, Yuiri stared as she earnestly rambled. Hearing this, Yukina blinked her eyes in apparent surprise.

“U...unapproachable? Scary?”

“Yeah. You never smiled even when you won, and you were always blunt when talking to people. I really got bent out of shape when my awesome jokes just sailed over your head.”

“Th-that is because I was tense before the competition...”

Yukina weakly defended herself. But the adorable look on her face had apparently pricked Yuiri’s funny bone, for she continued smiling, even letting a giggle slip out.

“You were really serious and straitlaced, and your grades were top tier, too. So you were, well, hard to socialize with.”

“You really thought of me like that...?”

Yui reflected a little when she observed Yukina’s genuine shock. She couldn’t help but find it somewhat humorous that even on their reunion after a fairly long interval, her earnestness had not changed a bit.

“Ah, but I don’t mean people hated you at all. A lot of the younger girls really looked up to you. That’s why, when I heard that Yukii was the one given the Schneewaltzer and made the watcher for the Fourth Primogenitor, I was like *I knew it’d be her.*”

When Kojou heard Yuiri’s follow-up to a flustered Yukina, his mouth opened as if he had come to realize something.

“I see... Yuiri’s a Sword Shaman, too, so it could’ve been her living right next door instead of Himeragi?”

“Eh? Yukii, you live right next to Kojou?”

Yui gawked at Yukina in surprise. Her junior raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. It is part of the mission.”

“Ohh... A-all right.”

Naturally, half the reason Yuiri was knocked off-balance was from how Kojou had spoken of it like it was nothing. After all, it was an iron rule of the romance novels Yuiri dotingly read: When classmates lived next door to one another, romance followed.

Yuiiri could hardly remain calm at the thought that it might have been herself living next door to Kojou.

She was indulging herself in such fantasies when Kojou posed his next question to Yukina.

“So what was Yuiiri like back in the day?”

“Eh?!”

Yuiiri felt distinct unease when she suddenly became the topic of discussion, all the more because it was just after Yuiiri had babbled all about Yukina.

Then, thinking she should honestly reply to Kojou’s question, Yuiiri’s overly serious junior opened her mouth and said, “Let’s see. The first time I remember meeting her, it was nighttime right after a field exercise—”

“Yukii, please, anything but that!”

The sight of Yuiiri desperately bowing her head made Kojou and Glenda raise their voices in laughter.

A benefit of the entirely trivial conversation was that Yuiiri could feel her depleted willpower gradually recover. Her sense of tension and wariness toward Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, was vanishing as well.

However, at the same time, she felt a single doubt within her.

When she thought about it rationally, Kojou had no duty to save Yuiiri or Glenda. He’d come to that land to protect his little sister; he had no reason to fight Azama.

Why, then, had he gone so far to protect Yuiiri and Glenda?

The one thing she did understand was this: It was no doubt because Kojou had that kind of personality that Yukina—this very earnest girl next to him—trusted him, enough that Yuiiri wondered if Yukina trusted him a little too much...

“Senpai, your manners are poor.”

She glared at him and voiced her complaint when he audibly slurped his soup. However, Kojou shrugged his shoulders, failing to concede the point.

“I can’t move my right hand, so I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Goodness. Give me that... Here you go.”

Having had enough, Yukina stole the dish from Kojou’s hand and brought the soup to his lips with a spoon. It was the sort of pose where you’d expect someone to go *Say aah*. Kojou merely went “Mm” as brief thanks, sipping the soup from Yukina’s spoon as if it was no big deal.

Then, when he took a bite from a cereal bar between sips, he said, “Hey, this is pretty tasty.”

“Is that so? Somehow, it looks rather odd...”



“Yeah, that’s what surprised me. I think you’ll like the taste, too, Himeragi. Here.”

Kojou tendered the partially eaten cereal bar in front of Yukina as he spoke. Without hesitation, Yukina leaned forward and nibbled at the tip like a little bird.

“It really is tasty...”

“Told ya.”

Kojou nodded as he glanced around the surrounding area. Yukina, watching him, picked up a PET bottle at Kojou’s feet and said, “Water? Here you go.”

“Ah, thanks.”

With a very natural-looking demeanor, Yukina opened the lid of the bottle, and Kojou accepted it from her without the slightest hint of suspicion. The reason Kojou did not move away from the chilly windowsill was apparently because he was letting Yukina sit in front of the woodstove, the most comfortable place in the cabin.

For a while, Yui gazed at the frighteningly natural interaction between the pair with a neutral expression. Eventually, she was seized by the abrupt impulse to exclaim, “Are you two husband and wife?!”

She ended up blurting it out at the top of her lungs.

“Th-the heck?!”

“Yui?”

Kojou and Yukina looked at Yui with surprise, as if the pair could not understand why Yui had said that all of a sudden. No doubt they never even dreamed that their own behavior was somehow untoward.

But seeing Yukina and Kojou in such intimacy melted Yui’s sense of guilt just a smidgeon.

The fact Yukina had undertaken a dangerous mission in Yui’s place had not changed. However, in so doing, she had gained something that Yui did not possess—

“I’m sorry, it’s really nothing. I just felt like yelling it out.”

“R-right.”

She appeared unapologetic, but Kojou nodded nonetheless.

Maybe stuffing her belly had made Glenda drowsy again, for she was already curled up on the blanket, asleep once more. However, the low moans and the small twitches of Glenda’s ears made it seem like she was having a nightmare.

At the same time, Yui noticed something else—a possessor of strange magical energy was approaching the cabin. The instant Yui tried to tell Kojou and Yukina, she saw the latter already stretching her hand to the spear standing beside her.

“Senpai... A wyvern.”

“So they found us... That didn’t take long. Shit.”

Kojou stuffed the rest of the cereal bar into his mouth and quickly rose to his feet.

When Yui looked more closely, both Kojou and Yukina were still wearing their shoes. They might have looked relaxed, but both had been prepared if Azama and the others came raiding.

Yukina, seeing Yui rush to go after them, calmly told her, “Yui, please take care of Glenda. If worse comes to worst, please, leave us and run.”

“Yukii...”

When Yui watched Yukina head out of the cabin, a strained, spontaneous smile came over her.

She repeated the words Yukina had spoken as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Us, *huh*...?

3

The gunmetal wyvern landed a short distance away from the cabin.

Riding on it was Azama wearing knightly plate, all by himself. There was no sign of the other wyvern or the gunmetal magic user that mounted it.

Perhaps the wyvern had been entangled in the attack from Kojou's Beast Vassal. It was heavily wounded all over its body, with bare metal visible underneath where the scales had been stripped off. The wyverns, too, were golems created by the sorcerous devices of the Sinful God.

"Major Azama...right? You're alone?"

Kojou posed the question as the man in knightly plate dismounted his wyvern.

Azama did not have his lance in hand; he'd taken off one of his sorcerous devices—his knight's helm. He was unexpectedly young, a weathered man reminiscent of a hunting dog.

"Kojou Akatsuki..... I would like a word with you."

"With me?"

Kojou dubiously knit his brows at Azama's unexpected words.

"Yes," said Azama, nodding gravely as he continued, "Due to my position, I am aware of many of the circumstances surrounding your becoming Fourth Primogenitor—information largely unknown even to the Defense Forces brass."

"What are you getting at?"

Kojou grimaced. There was nothing comforting about someone he didn't know or had even seen before saying *I know about your past*.

"Do you not wish to know the reason why we are attempting to capture Glenda? Or rather, just what Glenda, a so-called dragon, truly is..."

"...I'm listening," Kojou replied after some hesitation. After all, that was exactly the information he sought.

Having clearly expected that answer from Kojou, Azama smiled as he continued.

"You probably understand from mythology that the ancient superhumans known as Devas quarreled with the otherworldly god known as Cain. We call this conflict The Cleansing."

“I’ve also heard that it’s not accepted as historical fact by scholars,” Kojou rebutted. “Isn’t that just a myth?”

He wasn’t making light of Azama; he just found it hard to believe such a serious a man would act based on such vague information.

“But the fact remains that, on the other hand, much of the sorcerous technology has vestiges from this Cleansing as their foundation. Sorcery, ritual magic, alchemy, and sorcerous devices—even the Schneewaltzer employed by the Sword Shaman next to you was constructed with an ancient treasured spear as its core. This also applies to you, Fourth Primogenitor.”

“So what of it? What does this have to do with Glenda?” Kojou squinted, his irritation evident.

“Even if The Cleansing was something that really happened, didn’t it end thousands of years ago?”

“Wars repeat themselves, even if both sides originally waging it have perished... It is said that the Devas were wiped out, but sorcery and demons remain in this world.”

Azama spun his words in his baritone voice with an odd degree of reverence.

“...Demons?”

“It is said that Cain is the creator of all demons. It is also said that he taught sorcery and science to humankind. In other words, the legacy of Cain, the Sinful God, is the law that governs this world.”

“Well, you’re free to believe that if you want, but...” Kojou sighed and shook his head. “That doesn’t mean it has anything to do with the here and now. Or do you plan to take God’s place and rewrite the laws of the world?”

“Of course not. Humans cannot become gods,” Azama said with a self-critical smile. Then, he shifted a defiant gaze Kojou’s way.

“But it is possible to resurrect a once-destroyed god...and to control it.”

“Control...a god...?” Kojou glared. “Are you crazy?”

In response, the Knight of the Sinful God smiled as he merely shook his head.

Kojou had heard that the Cleansers were heretic terrorists that worshipped Cain. However, if Azama's true objective was to *control that god*, the meaning behind all their actions was turned on its head. The Cleansers were not mere worshippers of Cain—quite the reverse. Their actions were inspired by repudiation of Cain and everything the Sinful God had wrought.

“Glenda, Dragon of the Marsh, is the guardian of the legacy Cain left. She is the vessel for the god's *information*. She is neither demon nor demon beast; in other words, merely one component of a system. This system was set to awaken when a particular condition is fulfilled.”

“Particular condition...?”

Kojou felt like the words Azama had spoken constituted a slight lead. What was the true reason behind the Lion King Agency using Nagisa Akatsuki as a sacrifice? What if the key to waking Glenda, a relic of The Cleansing, was the knowledge—the memories—of another relic from the same conflict that only Nagisa possessed?

Kojou arrived at an answer. “I see... The awakening of the Fourth Primogenitor...!”

Azama exhaled at length in recognition. “Certainly, Glenda poses little threat by herself. In spite of this, she is a relic that we Cleansers must obtain by whatever measures necessary. The Lion King Agency used that to set a trap and flush us out, but even if the greater portion of my brethren must be sacrificed, obtaining Glenda makes it all worthwhile.”

“...Why are you telling me all this?” Kojou had some serious misgivings; whatever the Cleansers' objective, there was surely no need for Azama to tell Kojou.

However, Azama trained a mysteriously earnest gaze toward the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Because, Kojou Akatsuki, you have a stake in this as well. You, once a human being, surely understand that demons possess extraordinary abilities—and just how easily they distort the world around us. A large city can be destroyed on the mere whim of a single vampire. What do you think the true form of this warped world would look like?”

“So what, you want to wipe out Demonkind...?”

Kojou twisted his face in disgust. He’d use the god that created demons to exterminate every last one. Azama’s goal was twisted, but Kojou could see the logic behind it.

“We merely seek to return the world to its proper form. Surely, these words must be gospel to your ears, Kojou Akatsuki—you would be released from your curse of immortality and granted death as a human being.”

Azama spoke with a stark tone.

He was telling Kojou to die as a human being rather than live on by himself for hundreds, even thousands of years.

That logic was stupid.

On the other hand, the proposal had its appeal.

To be blunt, the prospect of an uncertain future of eternal loneliness was too great for any single being to bear. Azama could free Kojou from such never-ending anguish.

So don’t get in my way was his message to Kojou.

“Depending on how you look at it, well, it’s not such a bad deal...if what you say is true.”

Kojou accepted the righteousness of the man’s claim. Kojou hadn’t obtained the power of an immortal vampire by choice in the first place. He had no reluctance to cast it aside. After all, immortality truly was a curse.

“Senpai...!”

Yukina trembled with anger when she heard Kojou’s murmur, seemingly devoid of self-preservation. Seeing Yukina like that, Kojou let out a vague, pained smile. It was none other than Yukina who had been assigned the mission of continuing to watch over the Fourth Primogenitor—and if necessary, slay him. Her anger wasn’t very rational.

“Hand Glenda over, Fourth Primogenitor. The vessel is necessary to us, so that we may oppose the Gigafloat Management Corporation.” Azama’s demand almost sounded businesslike.

Kojou gasped, his face going stiff. “The Gigafloat Management Corporation...?! What the hell does Itogami Island have to do with this...?!”

A moment later that he heard a *boom* like distant thunder. A huge flying object descended from the clouds loitering overhead, looking just as large as a passenger plane coming in for a landing.

“Senpai! That’s...?!”

“The heck?! Is that a cargo plane...?”

The airplane, dabbed in a grayish color, greatly resembled a military cargo plane, but the countless gun ports built into the fuselage’s sides meant it could not possibly be any mere transport.

The enormous, malevolent craft was descending from a high altitude toward the cabin where Glenda and Yui remained.

“This is the trump card of the Self-Defense Forces Special Attack Mage Regiment... An AC-2 gunship. Now it belongs to us, however,” Azama stated calmly and without boasting.

The aircraft, its design based on a cargo plane, was packed with a vast quantity of arms and ammunition, granting it heavy weapons and high firepower impossible for a normal aircraft to wield, turning it into an attack aircraft for ground suppression—and the one piloting it was the woman in the gunmetal robe.

“You mean to tell us...you used the aircraft as material for a golem—?!” Yukina explained, her expression freezing once she realized Azama’s intentions.

The gunmetal magic user could transform a weapon of war into a golem based on the original specs. Even the golems based on armored personnel carriers had possessed fortitude and offensive might far beyond what was normally possible for them. This being the case, she couldn’t even conceive of the firepower a monster born from a gunship would possess.

Furthermore, they were able to nullify the attacks of Kojou’s Beast Vassals. Snowdrift Wolf, their only means to defy magic-nullifying barriers, could not reach a golem flying through the sky.

“The discussion is over, Kojou Akatsuki. Leave Glenda here, and withdraw.”

Azama put on his knightly helm. Behind him, the wyvern spread its enormous wings.

“Your story had a bit going for it, Major Azama.” Kojou smiled ferociously, fangs bared. “But I’ve seen you kill one of your own men and not even blink. Thanks to you Cleansers, a whole lot of innocent troops got hurt, too. I can’t trust you, and I ain’t handing Glenda to anyone I don’t trust.”

“I see... Most unfortunate, Fourth Primogenitor.”

Azama couched his lance once more, pointing it toward Kojou’s heart.

Next he announced, with raw emotion in his voice for the first time—

“Then die as a filthy demon!”

4

With a roar, the iron knight’s couched lance opened fire with the same pitch-black spheres that had wounded Glenda.

Kojou could not evade the attack. If he stepped aside, the sphere would strike the cabin, and Yuri and Glenda would suffer as a consequence. Therefore, Kojou raised his right hand high and howled:

“—C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number One, Mesarthim Adamas!”

Kojou endured the fierce pain hitting his right hand as he summoned a divine sheep that radiated light. The innumerable diamond crystals encircling the Beast Vassal formed a shield to fend off the knight’s attack.

Like pool balls, the trajectory of the jet-black spheres was altered as they slammed into the crystals, one after another. Various crystals turned into bullets of their own, assaulting Azama from various directions. The absolutely inviolate divine lamb was a frightening Beast Vassal of retribution.

However, Azama deployed his jet-black aura to impede those diamond bullets.

Though the black membrane lacked the slightest depth, it seemed to

permeate thin air, encroaching upon and repainting the very world itself. Without a sound, the attacks by the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassal were swallowed up by the darkness.

"That black curtain thingy again...!"

Kojou felt nervous that the knight's power was neutralizing his Beast Vassal, but also, he was quietly relieved.

Even if he was armed with relics from The Cleansing, Azama himself was just a human being. If he was showered in attacks from a Beast Vassal, he was a dead man. The fact that his opponent was a murderer didn't constitute a reason for Kojou to kill him...even if his objective was the slaughter of all Demonkind.

"—Senpai, please protect Glenda and Yui! I shall take Major Azama!" Yukina said, leaping forward in his hesitation as she poised her silver spear.

Kojou had no time to stop her. He was striking down all the bullets fired by the iron knight as Yukina instantly closed the distance.

"You are in my way, Sword Shaman!"

Azama commanded his wyvern to attack. The flying gunmetal demon beast obstructed Yukina so her attacks would never reach the iron knight. With the wyvern whipping about almost at ground level, its mass alone was a menace. Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf, lacking additional physical effects, could not fend off such power.

"Himeragi—! Get down!"

When Kojou rushed forward to protect Yukina, the gunship *roared*.

The enormous silhouette circling in the sky above no longer retained the form of an aircraft. It had adopted the form of a nine-headed mock hydra, its enormity far greater than that of the dragon Glenda or the wyverns. The multiheaded monster, inheriting the gunship's firepower, spewed pitch-black flames with incredible force.

"A black...cannonball...?!"

Kojou's Beast Vassal deployed its defensive wall. But the countless diamond crystals boasting great density completely broke apart in the face of the mock

hydra's attacks. It was the same as the gunfire from Azama's lance: The mock hydra's cannonball had been granted the ability to nullify demonic energy.

With the Beast Vassal's wall smashed, the pitch-black cannonball assaulted the now-defenseless Kojou.

Just before that enormous sphere swallowed him whole, a dazzling beam sliced across thin air.

"Rosen Chevalier Plus—activate!"

Yui, silver long sword in hand, landed in front of Kojou. The rift in space created by her sword strike fended off the pitch-black cannonball. The cannonball's magic energy-nullifying ability made the pseudo-spatial severing effect end, but by that time, the cannonball itself had dissipated.

"Yui...?!"

"I'm sorry! But I thought hiding against an opponent like this wouldn't be any help—"

"Ah, nah... I suppose you're right. You saved me. And Glenda?"

"Dah!"

When Kojou looked around, the parka-wearing Glenda leaped onto his back with an audible *puff* against his parka. The feel of the girl's light body brought a perplexed look over Kojou, whereupon Yui lowered her eyes.

"Er... Kojou, I thought the safest place for her was probably behind your back, so..."

Apparently, Glenda was clinging to Kojou on Yui's instructions. Perhaps Yui hadn't expected Glenda to be quite *that* close behind him.

"That part's fine, but this ain't good. At this rate—"

Kojou felt distinctly uneasy as he looked up at the hydra overhead. If he soaked up the next attack from the hydra, he was pretty sure Yui wouldn't be able to block it. If he didn't defeat that giant golem before that happened—

"Shit!! C'mon over, Regulus Aurum! Al-Meissa Mercury!"

Kojou summoned two new Beast Vassals—the lightning lion and the

quicksilver, twin-headed dragon. These attempted to pummel the hydra dancing overhead and shoot its giant frame down.

The gunmetal magic user standing atop one of the hydra's heads blocked their attacks. The pitch-black aura spreading from the openings of her robe covered the hydra's entire body.

The hydra shuddered from the collisions, but that was all. If sealed off from demonic energy, even the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor could not destroy the enormous creature.

That said, he couldn't resort to the same means he'd used to strike down the wyverns before. The hydra was simply too close. If he let his Beast Vassals run amok in that situation, Kojou and his allies would not emerge unscathed, and this time, he'd most certainly kill Azama and his companion.

"No good, then...!"

The hydra unleashed its flames with a roar. Kojou's Beast Vassals unleashed their respective attacks to counter the flying pitch-black cannonball. Even so, they could not stop it, leaving the cannonball to bear down on Kojou and the others from overhead—

"—Snowdrift Wolf!"

It was Yukina who struck it down right before Kojou's and the others' eyes.

"Are you all right, senpai?! Yuii?!"

"Yukii...!"

"Himeragi! The wyvern...?!"

Seeing that they were safe, although shaken, Yukina gently pointed in front of her. The wyvern she'd been fighting was writhing on the ground, one wing and its torso deeply gouged. The hydra's cannon fire had struck it.

No—rather, Yukina had lured it into a position where the hydra's attack would make it a victim. Yukina had used herself as a decoy to make one enemy shoot the other. With Snowdrift Wolf, she'd shredded the pitch-black aura that would have otherwise protected the wyvern.

"...A Schneewaltzer of the Lion King Agency...a troublesome weapon indeed. I

had heard it could rend any barrier, but to think it would even sever the encroachment of Nod,” Azama murmured in a low, half-admiring tone.

“Encroachment of Nod...?”

Kojou mulled over the unfamiliar words Azama had let slip from his lips.

“Nod is another world, that where Cain, the Sinful God, was exiled. So, too, is it a hollow world where, through The Cleansing, the god lost his omnipotence...”

Surprisingly, Azama came right out and replied to Kojou’s question.

I see, thought Kojou as he made a wordless nod. If all demonic energy in the world was the product of Cain, and Cain’s power did not function in Nod, it meant Nod was a world where demonic energy did not exist.

The black aura that nullified demonic energy was actually traces of Nod leaking into their world.

“So that antique-looking armor is a sorcerous device for controlling the encroachment of Nod, then? I thought you just liked dressing up.”

“I hardly desire to dress up like a jester, but—I accept it as a necessary evil. After all, thanks to this, I am able to obtain the power to wipe demons like you off the face of the Earth in one fell swoop.”

Azama spread his jet-black mantle. However, the night-colored aura that oozed forth covered not thin air but was instead silently absorbed by the ground at Azama’s feet.

Perplexed, Kojou watched as the black shadowlike marring spread beneath his own feet. This smear became countless blades lacking any depth, emerging from underground to pierce Kojou’s body—

“What...?!”

At once, Kojou was stricken by fierce pain and dull impacts.

“Senpai——!”

“Kojou?!”

Yukina and Yuri looked over, eyes wide in shock. Even with their ability to

peer into the future, the girls had been unable to respond to the invisible subterranean attack.

“Gah... Haah...!”

The blades, the color of night, impaling Kojou’s entire body had dampened his vampiric powers. Kojou coughed up blood, unable to speak a word, thus robbed of the ability to summon Beast Vassals. It took all the strength he could muster to save Glenda by thrusting her off his back.

The darkness spreading at Kojou’s feet proceeded to encroach on space itself, swallowing Kojou’s entire body.

“Yui, don’t... Take Glenda...and run...”

Just as Yui rushed over, Kojou put a stop to her with a look alone. At that point, if Yui carelessly touched Kojou, she would be dragged into the void with him.

Yukina thrust out her silver spear, but the encroachment of Nod was swifter. Kojou completely melted into the darkness, leaving only a black ooze behind.

“Primary objective accomplished. Captain Okiyama, take care of the rest.”

“Copy that.”

Accepting Azama’s instructions, the gunmetal magic user descended from atop the hydra. Azama intended for her to take Yukina and Yui on by herself while he captured Glenda.

“I shall buy time! Yui, please take Glenda and go!”

“Yukii...!”

Watching from behind, hesitation ran through Yui’s eyes as she watched Yukina enter a combat stance.

It was impossible for Yukina to take on Azama, Okiyama, and the hydra all by herself. Having them take one another down with friendly fire like she’d done with the wyvern probably wouldn’t work, either.

That said, if Yui went down with her, it would leave no one to protect Glenda.

What should I do? anguished Yui when, before her eyes, a completely unexpected act came from Glenda.

“Uu——!”

Of her own will, Glenda leaped into the pitch-black stagnation remaining on the ground’s surface—the hollow darkness that had swallowed Kojou. A moment after Glenda, too, vanished, the darkness continued to shrink until it dissipated altogether.

With a flapping sound, only the parka she had worn fell onto the ground.

“G...Glenda?!”

“What...?!”

It was not only Yui and Yukina who were surprised. Azama, himself the one supposedly controlling the encroachment, gazed dumbfounded at the unexpected turn of events. He exclaimed in a flabbergasted tone, “The vessel herself...swallowed...by Nod...! How can this be...?!”

The despair of his quivering voice rammed home the stark truth.

Even the power of the Knight of the Sinful God could not bring back that consumed by the darkness.

5

A city of never-ending summer—

There, over the pacific, floated a tiny island.

A man-made isle surrounded by a sea that was red like blood.

The sky was scarlet, as if just after sunset. The ruin of an enormous building towered against the background of the vermillion sky. The broken and battered buildings of the surrounding area had been destroyed, burned to the ground. It looked like a scene right after a great natural disaster had struck—or the immediate aftermath of being razed in the midst of armed conflict.

“What...is this place?”

Kojou frailly murmured as he surveyed the ruins that somehow felt familiar to

him. The voice was mixed with an anguished groan.

Azama's attack led to his entire body being impaled and swallowed by the hollow darkness. When Kojou came to, he was all alone in a strange world.

The raw wounds left all over his body were proof that this was neither a memory nor a dream. The clothes on his body, and even the ground at his feet, were drenched in his own blood as it flowed down his body.

Having lost his vampiric regenerative abilities, it was probably only a matter of time before he died from blood loss. But in that moment, it was not his own life or death that he noticed, but the world itself.

"Don't tell me this is...Itogami Island...?!"

Kojou was bewildered when he realized that the rubble of the wrecked building bore an uncanny resemblance to Itogami Island's Keystone Gate. The layout of the streets—and the monorail-like overhead structure that surrounded the artificial isle—greatly resembled those of Itogami Island. But—

"No, it's different..."

Perplexed, Kojou shook his head when he realized the signs and billboards bore characters he'd never seen before.

As he suspected, this world was not Itogami Island. Though greatly resembling it, this was a different land altogether.

The encroachment of Nod should've swallowed me up, so what am I doing in a place like this? That was what Kojou asked himself.

It was the next moment that he sensed someone else approach.

"Who's there...?! Is someone out there?"

When Kojou turned back, his eyes caught sight of a single man standing in the rubble of a ruined building.

The evening sunrays at his back rendered Kojou unable to get a good look at his face.

What Kojou *did* recognize was the broken spear he held against his chest—

And beyond that, he noticed the presence of twelve hazy, black wings floating

behind his back.

The man looked like he was in mourning—or perhaps singing...

“_____....._____”

Finally, Kojou realized that the man’s lips were trembling, as if he was trying to tell him something.

But before those words could be voiced, the man faded and then...vanished.

At the same time, Kojou realized that the island in ruins had begun silently dissipating as well, turning into minute particles of light.

It had begun to fade and vanish, like a memory from long ago—

“Remnants of thoughts...or something like that?”

Kojou felt acute nervousness as he surveyed the landscape being consumed by darkness all around him, for the artificial ground beneath Kojou’s feet, and even Kojou’s own flesh and blood, had slowly begun to dissipate as well.

Everything was emitting a pale light as it melted, vanishing into the void.

“Ugh... This ain’t good...”

Kojou gritted his teeth as he suffered the ferocious encroachment of Nod.

Am I gonna vanish in a place like this? he thought, resentment and anger spreading within.

But as he currently was, Kojou had no power with which to resist his annihilation. It would be the same if he still had his vampire powers. After all, only the Divine Oscillation Effect of Snowdrift Wolf could oppose the encroachment of Nod.

The silver spear only Yukina possessed—

“What the...?!”

The instant the sight of Yukina and the spear dubbed Snowdrift Wolf arose in the back of his mind, ferocious pain ran through Kojou’s right hand.

It was as if he’d received a sudden jolt from an invisible circuit embedded into the back of his hand, sending electricity coursing through him.

The next moment, the assault on Kojou's body...stopped.

All around Kojou, he was enveloped by a transparent, radiant membrane that resembled a soap bubble. That membrane protected Kojou from the black void.

"A barrier? This light... It's the same as Snowdrift Wolf's..."

Kojou murmured, beside himself as he realized the true nature of the glowing membrane that had halted the encroachment of Nod.

Without question, it was a Divine Oscillation Effect barrier that had rescued Kojou from the danger of annihilation. He'd seen and remembered Yukina employing similar techniques several times over.

Yet, Yukina wasn't there. And yet, such a powerful Divine Oscillation Effect had been embedded into Kojou's right hand—he could only think of a single possibility.

"Paper Noise... Back then, she must have...!"

The bizarre wound purportedly still carved into his right hand had vanished. The lost feeling in his right hand had returned. In the final instant of their clash, Koyomi Shizuka had sealed Kojou's right hand with a barrier ritual.

Realizing that she couldn't stop Kojou from leaving Itogami Island, she'd taken out an insurance policy. She'd secretly planted a trump card into Kojou that could save him from annihilation should he encounter an enemy that could manipulate the encroachment of Nod—without Kojou ever suspecting.

Kiriha Kisaki had identified what had been carved into his right hand as a sealing ritual. However, seals were not limited to ensuring your opponent could not escape. Depending on the circumstance, seals were employed to protect what was on the inside. It was the latter which Koyomi Shizuka had carved into Kojou.

Thinking back upon it, the wound in Kojou's right hand hadn't hurt when he'd summoned his Beast Vassals. Without exception, Kojou's wound throbbed right after someone had used a sorcerous device of the Sinful God. That wound had reacted to the encroachment of Nod.

Even so, thought Kojou, *sighing.*

Thanks to Paper Noise's spell, he'd escaped instant annihilation, but that didn't mean he'd returned to his own world. The Divine Oscillation Effect barrier wouldn't last forever, either.

Unless he could find a way to slip out from Nod, annihilation really was only a matter of time.

Kojou thought *What should I do?* and clutched his head—

“Dah... Kojou...!”

A dragon's roar made the air inside the barrier tremble.

An enormous dragon seemed to be swimming in hollow darkness, heading straight in Kojou's direction.

By the time he began to fear he would be squished flat by its overwhelming mass, the dragon transformed into a girl.

Glenda slipped right through the Divine Oscillation Effect barrier and glommed on to Kojou's back.

“G-Glenda?! How the hell did you get here...?!”

Kojou looked back in astonishment at the side of the naked, innocently smiling girl.

Glenda touched one of his bleeding wounds and asked, “Does it hurt? Kojou, does it hurt?”

“If you understand, then don't touch like that...” He grimaced and weakly groaned as she nonchalantly stroked his wound sites.

Of course, he had no idea why Glenda had appeared in that place. He was mindful of Yukina and Yui as well, both left behind in their original world. Either way, Glenda's appearance meant that waiting for annihilation was no longer an option. He had to bring her back to the real world by any means necessary.

“Shit, why the hell did you have to come here, too?”

“Bring...Kojou back. Make Yui...happy,” replied the girl with hair the color of steel.

“Ah, so that’s what it is,” Kojou said quietly, sighing. She must have leaped into that world of emptiness solely to make Yuiri happy.

“Glenda, do you know what we’ve got to do to get outta here?” he asked as he gingerly held the girl in his arms.

In any event, the fact she was naked meant her moving away from him posed a number of problems. Also, he wanted to avoid carelessly letting go of her and letting them get separated. As a result, the girl was pressed right against Kojou’s body.

Glenda’s beautiful, hematite-like eyes stared right back at Kojou.

“Glenda...understands... Glenda...is the vessel for the information... Must reach...the priestess...”

“...Priestess?”

Kojou was perplexed as he listened to Glenda’s terribly fragmented words. The warmth of humanity was gradually vanishing, and her innocent expression shifted to one that almost seemed robotic.

Glenda was enveloped by a faint glow, and her contours became vague and blurred.

“Bring back...Kojou... Everyone will be...happy...”

Glenda, wreathed in blue light, transformed before Kojou’s eyes.

Kojou was on guard for her to become a dragon, but what appeared was an unexpected girl’s face.

She had silver hair and blue eyes. She had a face as gentle as a saint’s—Kanon Kanase.

“Kanase...? How...?!”

Before the surprised Kojou, light surrounded Glenda once more. The next to appear was Yuuma Tokoyogi’s androgynous face. Then, La Folia’s regal visage. Then, Sayaka Kirasaka’s elegant figure rose to the fore.

That was when Kojou finally realized the reason why Glenda knew what they looked like—

“You’re...sifting through my memories...?”

She was displaying the girls whose blood Kojou had once drunk.

An indigo-haired homunculus girl appeared, and after that, Glenda changed into the final girl.

Yukina Himeragi. The small-statured Sword Shaman whose blood was the first Kojou had drank of his own will—

“...My...blood... Please, drink my blood...”

Speaking those words in Yukina’s form, Glenda offered the nape of her neck.

Yukina’s voice, Yukina’s appearance—both were straight out of Kojou’s memories.

“Senpai, through vampiric action, you will gain the memory of the blood... I will grant you the power of the information inside me. The power to defy the encroachment of Nod.”

Glenda—or Yukina—took Kojou’s hand, gently guiding it to her own bosom.

She pressed it over the faint bulge of her chest, so that he might feel the beating of the heart beneath.

“Wai... What are you...?!”

The sensation of smooth flesh and soft firmness he had never touched before blanked out Kojou’s thoughts. His canines throbbed, and his throat was struck by a powerful sense of dryness.

Heavy breathing. Heartbeats. Body warmth. The comfortable presence of her touch—her scent.

Azama had called her a vessel. Glenda had said she was a vessel for information.

Then who filled her with that information...? he wondered.

A song trickled out from Glenda’s lips. A tune of lament that the boy had sung, clutching the broken spear to his chest in the light of dusk.

“I get it... Glenda, you’re...”

Kojou murmured as his eyes were dyed scarlet. Glenda was no longer in Yukina's form; she'd already returned to her own. However, Kojou obeyed his own vampiric impulses and sank his fangs into her slender neck.

He felt a little guilt toward Yukina, but even so, he had to bring Glenda back with him.

Back to their own world... To the world of the living.

"Ah..."

The girl squirmed in Kojou's arms, letting out a slender, frail breath.

And then—

6

The hydra's attack hollowed out the ground. Yukina and Yuiri just barely managed to evade it.

Azama, encased in the gunmetal knight's armor, deployed the nullifying aura over the surface of the ground once more.

He no doubt meant to open the once-closed passage to Nod anew. Perhaps he hoped that Glenda would return on her own power.

In that case, Yukina and Yuiri's presence was a nuisance to him. Hence, the gunmetal magic user—Mikage Okiyama—was playing her support role for Azama by attempting to eliminate the pair.

"Yukii! I'll draw off the big one, so while I do that—!"

"Right!"

Yukina left Yuiri to take on the hydra as she aimed at the gunmetal magic user who'd disembarked onto the ground. Either way, Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf could not defeat the armor protecting the hydra.

But if she defeated Mikage Okiyama, the thin film of nothingness covering the hydra would vanish. If that happened, Yuiri could surely destroy the hydra afterward.

"—?!"

Yukina's spear rent the magic user's robe. But the pitch-black aura enveloping Okiyama did not dissipate. Indeed, she stripped off her own robe, employing it as a shield to obstruct Yukina's vision.

Then, from a blind spot behind the robe, the rod hurtled toward Yukina. A gleaming, glossy-black rod—

Yukina just barely parried the blow. Had she not blocked it, the impact would have blown her back quite a distance. Mikage Okiyama, seeing that Yukina had not even lost her balance from such a blow, smiled in a show of admiration.

Her expression was composed to an irritating extent.

“So that is your sorcerous device, Captain Okiyama,” Yukina spat with a glare.

The armor that Azama wore was a sorcerous device from the Sinful God capable of controlling the encroachment of Nod itself. Yukina had thought that the woman's robe functioned as a sorcerous device as well.

It was not so. The magic user-style robe was a simple fraud.

Thanks to her realizing that so late, Yukina's first attack was spectacularly foiled...even though any delay in defeating Okiyama would put Yui in that much more danger.

“Yes, that's right. Let's see, you are...Yukina Himeragi, the other Sword Shaman?” Mikage Okiyama twirled the rod in her hand as she glared at Yukina. “Please rest at ease. This sorcerous device is a mere replica. Creating golems and covering things in a veil of nothingness is the upper limit of what it can do. However—”

A second later, Mikage Okiyama grew hazy within Yukina's field of vision.

Okiyama bounded forward with incredible speed. She thrust her rod. Even with Yukina's quick reaction, all she could manage was barely evading the arc of the attack. The bayonet attached to the tip of the rod slid just past Yukina's shoulder.

“Bayonet weapon arts—?!!”

“Do you really believe you can defeat me in close combat? I am from the Special Attack Mage Regiment, you know?”

Mikage Okiyama's ceaseless flurry of attacks gradually pushed Yukina back on her heels.

She was unimaginably strong. In terms of raw hand-to-hand skill, Mikage Okiyama far outstripped Yukina.

The magic user's rod was inferior to the Sword Shaman's spear in reach, but it was far easier to swing in confined spaces. Okiyama was challenging Yukina to a battle of blunt attacks at point-blank range to employ this advantage to the utmost. Yukina, inferior to her in size and musculature, couldn't grasp a foothold with which to counterattack.

"That spear is claimed to be invincible against demons, but against a human being like me, it is nothing more but an anachronistic melee weapon! And your Sword Shaman's Spirit Sight is useless against the encroachment of Nod covering me!"

"Ugh...!"

Mikage Okiyama rammed her body into Yukina's, sending the latter flying. Although, to Yukina, this constituted an opportunity, for she'd finally obtained the room with which to get her spear back into a proper posture.

At the same time she landed, she put her ragged breathing in order and lifted her face. Then, Yukina saw Mikage Okiyama retreat with a backward leap of her own. *Why?* thought a confused Yukina, and during that momentary opening, Okiyama issued an order to her golem.

"AC-2, open fire!"

"Oh n—!"

A moment after Yukina touched down, the nine heads of the hydra spewed flames toward her all at once.

"Yukii, get down!"

With Yukina frozen in place, Yuiji jumped in front of her. She swung her long silver sword downward, deploying a pseudo-spatial severing bulwark, but the hydra's initial attack easily smashed that absolute barrier to pieces.

Rosen Chevalier Plus could no longer be used until it had been recharged with

ritual energy. Yuiri laughed dryly, seemingly at her own expense, as the hydra took aim for another volley.

We'll never dodge it—

Yukina and Yuiri made small gasps as they simultaneously grasped that fact.

A moment later, the hydra was engulfed in flames.

The impact from the direct hit of a tank cannon greatly staggered the golem's enormous body.

“Uu—?!”

It was not Yukina nor Yuiri who was shaken by the sight, but Mikage Okiyama.

A scarlet-painted micro-robot tank had emerged from the dense evergreen forest. Its main gun had sniped Mikage Okiyama's golem.

With binoculars in one hand, a girl with an extravagant hairstyle poked her head out of a hatch and shouted:

“It felt that one, Tanker! Give it another!”

“’Twas most fortuitous that I upgraded the firepower!”

As soon as the auto-loader finished, the pilot of the robot tank fired the next round. Simultaneously, a large barrage of anti-tank missiles sailed into the air from the missile pods on the back of the tank.

The hydra's enormous body crumbled in a great mass of scattered metal fragments.

Mikage Okiyama's gunmetal rod was a sorcerous device for transforming modern weaponry into demon beasts. Its offensive power was inherited by the resulting demon beast, but at the same time, the resilience of the demon beast's defense was no greater than that of the weapon from which it had come. A gunship design based on a cargo plane wasn't tough enough to hold up against tank artillery.

The little, scarlet robot tank had delivered a one-sided stomping upon the huge golem. By the time the tank had exhausted all its shells, the hydra had become a pile of scrap on the verge of death.

“Aiba—!”

Yukina briefly stood dumbfounded before calling out to the girl atop the tank, which came to a stop right beside Yukina and Yuri.

“Sorry I’m late, Himeragi. Where’s Kojou?”

“He’s—”

Yukina awkwardly stopped speaking as her eyes shifted toward the gunmetal knight.

Azama, caring nothing for the destroyed golem, gazed at the thin film of nothingness still spread over the ground.

“So he was swallowed by the encroachment of Nod? Heh-heh.” A foreign boy riding atop the tank, seemingly grasping all from the sight before him, laughed in amusement. He had an abnormally dense level of demonic energy.

“Iblisveil Aziz, I presume...? And the Priestess of Cain. At a time like this...”

Azama drew his lance as he glared at the boy.

Yuri gawked and looked up at the boy when she heard the name *Iblisveil Aziz*. For her part, simple bewilderment floated into Yukina’s eyes. Naturally, Yukina, too, knew the infamy of Iblisveil Aziz, evil prince of the Fallen Dynasty. He was an ultra-dangerous individual in the league of Dimitrie Vattler. Yukina couldn’t even begin to understand how such a vile vampire prince had come to act in concert with Asagi Aiba.

“Captain Okiyama.”

“Yes, Major. I shall dispose of the tank—”

Azama and Mikage Okiyama readied their respective sorcerous devices for battle.

Yukina and Yuri went on guard as well. Even if they’d lost the hydra, Azama still had the encroachment of Nod on his side. Even with the aid of Iblisveil Aziz, they could not afford to be careless.

However, in contrast to the lethal antagonism between Yukina and the rest, Iblisveil’s expression was gentle.

The vampire prince bared his teeth as he gazed at the emptiness left on the ground. “Do not be hasty, Underling of the Sinful God—I am not your opponent. Not yet, at least.”

“What...?!”

Azama’s face was hidden by the knightly plate, but Yukina somehow knew it had twisted from shock. Though he had doubtlessly relinquished control over the encroachment of Nod, far from dissipating, it was slowly coalescing.

It was as if someone was prying open an invisible doorway—

The demonic energy erupting from within the darkness was absolutely not Glenda’s. It was the far more ferocious, far more malevolent demonic energy of the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

“That’s crazy! Does this mean a demon...a mere demon broke through Nod’s barrier on his own power?!”

An echo of bewilderment was mixed into the tenor of Azama’s voice. To he, wishing to subdue Cain the Sinful God, Nod *had* to be a world that rejected the existence of all supernatural power. A demon returning from that place simply could not be possible. Even the Fourth Primogenitor could be no exception.

“Why are you so surprised? There is one who successfully returned from Nod. Only one, in the very distant past...,” Iblisveil said solemnly, pouring scorn on the rattled Azama.

Azama’s entire body froze, seemingly beside himself.

“You cannot mean he consumed the memories of Cain?! Such a thing would be absurd—”

Before the echoes of Azama’s broken voice, the darkness parted.

Along with an incredible torrent of demonic energy, a pair emerged: A boy and a girl tightly embraced. The boy somehow had a languid expression; the girl was petite and wore a rather baggy parka.

“Senpai! Miss Glenda!”

“K-Kojou?!”

“Glenda! Kojou—!”

Yukina, Asagi, and Yuiri let out surprised voices from their respective lips. Then...

“Fourth Primogenitor——!!”

...clad in gunmetal armor, the Knight of the Sinful God bellowed.

7

“Yuiriiiiiii!”

G-Glenda?!”

With incredible force, the steel-haired girl leaped, and Yuiri hastily caught her.

Glenda’s slender thighs were poking all the way out from the baggy parka’s bottom. Asagi’s face twitched as the sight stole her eyes.

“Wh-who’s *that*?! And why is she with Kojou...?!”

“Ohh, those art lovely legs indeed. A feast for the eyes.”

Where Asagi was nervous, Lydianne casually let out words of admiration.

Seeing the long stares coming from the girls, Kojou made a weary sigh. He was glad that Yuiri and the others were safe, but things seem to have become problematic, too.

As Kojou stood his ground like it was nothing special, the gunmetal knight malevolently howled, “Why, Fourth Primogenitor... Why did the vessel choose you...?!”

“I’m not really sure what you’re blabbing on about, Major Azama.”

Kojou specifically chose his words to get under Azama’s skin. Kojou finally felt real anger toward Azama, the man who’d put Glenda and the others in peril by brandishing his own, self-serving idea of justice.

“Glenda’s the one who saved me. You tried to use her as a tool, but she loaned me her strength of her own free will. Maybe a guy like you who kills his own men like it’s nothing would never understand.”

“How dare a traitor turned demonic down to his very soul speak this way to...” Azama glared with utmost scorn.

“Shut up, old man.”

Without fanfare, Kojou cut Azama’s insults short.

Kojou watched the angry, despairing Knight of the Sinful God with an icy look of pity.

“Maybe you have a point. Maybe this world is warped, just like you said. But if changing the world to its proper form is right, and your ideals are just, what’d you become a terrorist for? Don’t hide behind a mask! Go find a peaceful way to make the world the way you want, like the vampire primogenitors did with the Holy Ground Treaty!”

“Why you little...”

Even through the knightly helm, it was distinctly clear that Azama had rage painted on his face.

Observing this, Iblisveil made a gloating little laugh.

The words Kojou had spoken so nonchalantly had ripped the largest hole in the soft tissue inside of Azama. He’d kept averting his eyes from the truth, pretending that he had not realized it himself.

“You can’t do that, and that makes you lower than any demon. It’s got nothin’ to do with race or abilities. You lost to demons on justice. It’s not the world that’s twisted... It’s you for not being able to look the truth in the eye!!”

As Azama fell silent, Kojou took a step toward him.

The so-called Holy Ground Treaty was formed with the aim of coexistence between humans and Demonkind—and it was the vampire primogenitors’ powerful backing that had made it come to fruition. During the time the Cleansers had asserted the world could only be righted by the extinction of all demons, it was that very alliance of demonic lieges that had shown the world an achievable path to peace.

From that time onward, the Cleansers had lost all right to speak of justice.

That was why they were deemed terrorists and criminals.

“C’mon, old man. If you’re still gunning for Glenda in the name of justice, then I’ll be the one who stops you! From here on, this is *my* fight!”

“Kojou...Akatsukiiiiii—!!” Azama howled.

Once more, the encroachment of Nod was unleashed from the knightly plate. Once more, it stretched under the ground.

But the instant it turned into blades that attempted to run Kojou through, a silver flash stopped the thin film of nothingness in its tracks.

Surrounded by a pale radiance, Yukina’s spear thrust into the ground at Kojou’s feet.

“No, senpai. This is *our* fight!”

Yukina stopped the encroachment of Nod as she landed at Kojou’s side.

The subterranean onslaught of the Knight of the Sinful God’s attack was a grave threat, but advance warning made anticipating it no great feat. From the time Azama had first played that hand, he’d lost its original element of surprise.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Himeragi.”

On his own initiative, Kojou apologized for Yukina’s sake, thinking she’d probably been really worried. However, the gaze Yukina tossed his way was far frostier than Kojou expected.

“—You drank Miss Glenda’s blood, didn’t you, senpai?”

Kojou’s voice went shrill at Yukina’s flat tone.

There shouldn’t have been any telltale trace remaining, but Yukina had apparently realized it long before.

“Y-you’re wrong. Er, I mean, you’re not wrong, but, well, properly speaking, that was both Glenda and...not Glenda, so...”

Yukina listened, unmoved by the meandering, clear-as-mud explanation Kojou offered up. Then, lining up beside Kojou, she spun her silver spear around.

“Really? Then we will have a nice, long discussion about it afterward.”

As he listened to Yukina’s quiet statement, Kojou felt a small sense of despair. *She won’t let this go, will she...?*

During that time, Mikage Okiyama rushed to Azama's side, rod in hand.
"Major Azama—"

"I entrust the rest to you, Captain Okiyama."

Halting Okiyama with words like a man about to retreat, Azama pointed his lance toward his own heart. Its tip thrust toward his sternum.

The lance easily penetrated Azama's chest. There was neither blood nor a cry of pain. But the gunmetal knightly plate turned into pale particles of light as it swallowed the lance.

"Not good...!"

Kojou went pale when he realized what Azama was after. The Knight of the Sinful God possessed two sorcerous devices. One was the knightly plate that controlled the encroachment of Nod. The other was that lance—the sorcerous device that stole characteristics from a weapon, fusing its information to itself.

"He wants to have one sorcerous device of his consume the other...!"

"Huh?!"

Yukina's eyes went wide in shock. Having consumed the knightly plate, Azama's lance changed form, proving Kojou's prediction. Now that the two sorcerous devices had completely fused, they changed into a new, humanoid sorcerous device—in spite of the knightly plate Azama had worn swallowing up his body up in the process.

"Oh no... If he fuses with the sorcerous device, his mind will be lost in the process..."

Yukina clenched her silver spear as she spoke. Kojou kicked off the ground and leaped forward the moment he heard the words.

"Let's stop him, Himeragi!"

"Yes!"

As if saying it needed more information, the armored monster once called Azama stretched a hand toward the wreckage of the destroyed hydra. The lance sorcerous device could extract properties even from destroyed weapons. Indeed, that was how Azama had stolen First Lieutenant Ueyanagi's

information.

However, without its wielder, the hydra's information was simply too great for a single sorcerous device to control. Kojou didn't think a single, coherent personality would be left behind once Azama's thoughts had been diluted amid a vast influx of information.

The one possibility of saving Azama was to destroy the lance, the key to the transformation, before he had completely fused with it. But—

“I won't let you!”

—as Yukina readied her silver spear, Mikage Okiyama thrust her bayonet right at Yukina's eyes.

She was Azama's subordinate. She intended to honor his final command to the bitter end.

“Urk...!”

Yukina barely managed to evade Mikage Okiyama's attack from dreadfully close range.

By then, Azama completely merged with the wreckage of the supposedly destroyed hydra, giving it new life as a new demon beast. It was a bizarre monster resembling a mix between a ferocious crocodile and an oversize serpent. The knightly plate seemed like a carapace; it looked much like the legendary demon beast known as *genbu*, the black tortoise.

The opponent was now a monster over thirty meters in length. It was beyond Yukina's power to fight.

“Oh no, you don't, Sword Shaman—your Spirit Sight cannot fend off my attacks. In pure combat experience, you are nothing compared to me. You have no chance of victory.”

Mikage Okiyama, boasting superior endurance, had practically called for Yukina's surrender.

Certainly, it is as you say, Yukina mentally conceded. There was probably no way Yukina could beat her one-on-one. But Yukina was no longer fighting alone.

“Haaaaaaa—!”

Mikage Okiyama thrust the rod forward with an earsplitting cry. With Yukina's movements dulled from fatigue, the tip of her bayonet stabbed deep into the girl's throat.

The instant she thought her attack struck true, Yukina's figure flickered like a mirage.

An afterimage. No—an illusion spell.

"Absurd... A Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—using an illusion...?!"

Yukina's unexpected tactic brought Mikage Okiyama's series of attacks to a halt.

There was good reason for Mikage Okiyama to be rattled. Sword Shamans were heavily focused on anti-demon melee combat; they were not specialists in any area of magic. That was simply common sense. As a matter of fact, Yukina's illusion spells were strictly novice level.

But for making an opponent misjudge the range ever so slightly in the midst of melee combat, it was plenty.

Yukina had that lesson painfully beaten into her by the fight with Natsuki Minamiya a few days prior.

Combat...?

No, thought Yukina, shaking her head at the idea.

That was not something that deserved to be called *combat*.

Now that she thought about it, what Natsuki had conducted was better called *sparring*. This was Natsuki's parting gift—so that her pupils leaving Itogami Island might return safe and sound...

"Black Thunder—!"

Yukina leaped, countless afterimages in tow, all moving with agility well beyond human limits.

Her silver spear glimmered as it took aim at the rod in Mikage Okiyama's hands.

"Physical enchantment?! However—!!"

Mikage Okiyama responded to Yukina's raylike attack. As if to say *I see what you're aiming at*, her bayonet thrust out to counter. If Yukina had aimed at her sorcerous device with moronic forthrightness, the match would most likely have been decided then and there.

However, Yukina did not thrust out her spear. Without fanfare, she thrust only her weaponless left hand forward. With Mikage Okiyama off-balance, Yukina took aim, unleashing all her stored ritual energy at once.

"Fiery Lightning——!"

"Gah.....!"

Mikage Okiyama was defenseless when a mass of ritual energy, much like a transparent hammer, struck her as soon as she finished her attack. Instantly, Okiyama became unable to breathe as her entire body went rigid.

"...Seeing a Sword Shaman from the Lion King Agency so easily defeated makes me...sick to my stomach."

Kiriha Kisaki's barbed words echoed in the back of Yukina's mind.

It was Kiriha's technique to whip out a ritual spell and use it to launch a surprise attack. Normally, it was a tactic of the Priestesses of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology, but it was easy enough to learn for Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency, practitioners of common ancestry.

And then—

"Distort!"

Finally, Yukina unleashed a blunt attack at point-blank range. This basic Sword Shaman attack was Yukina's foremost specialty. By rights, it was a fiendish anti-demon technique that destroyed one's internal organs, but being a barehanded attack unleashed at point-blank range, it had the advantage of being easy to restrain.

Mikage Okiyama gaped at Yukina's face with an expression of disbelief as she slowly crumpled.

Separated from her hand, Yukina easily destroyed the sorcerous device with Snowdrift Wolf.

In terms of pure combat experience, Mikage Okiyama far outstripped Yukina—but that was all.

From the beginning, Yukina had not been fighting alone. There was the Lion King Agency that raised her, the many people she'd met on Itogami Island—she was supported by the strength that they had granted unto her. This was strength Mikage Okiyama had lost when she betrayed her comrades and organization and became a terrorist.

She could see it from the sorcerous devices the Cleansers employed. They stole and discarded others, nothing more.

From the moment they cut themselves off, becoming the enemies of all beings beyond themselves, Mikage Okiyama's combat experience became a perishable commodity. She'd abandoned the opportunity to grow as a person. That was the cause of Mikage Okiyama's defeat.

And there was one more person at Yukina's side—a boy bolstered by the feelings of many.

“Fourth Primogenitooooooooor!”

The giant tortoise roared with Azama's voice.

Like a storm, a volley of cannonballs spewed out of the mouth of the monster that was once a gunship. They targeted not only Kojou, but the nearby Yukina and Mikage Okiyama, threatening even to involve Glenda in the attack.

But an amber-colored wall erupted up from the ground to impede that indiscriminate attack.

“What?!”

A voice of shock sounding much like an earthquake trickled out from the *genbu's* mouth.

A wall of seething, incandescent magma interceded between Azama and Kojou. The high temperature it gave off warped the air, and the *genbu's* giant frame retreated from the oppressive feeling generated by its vast mass.

“I think you're pretty pathetic, you know,” Kojou quietly said from within the shimmering mirage. His eyes flared red with anger. “You don't flinch at

sacrificing anything for the cause. You'll use up and throw away the lives of your own people like it's nothing—I guess your own life counts as part of those sacrifices, huh?! That's way too twisted, even for you!"

"Shut up—"

The *genbu* unleashed its fusillade once more. Then, with the magma scorching his entire body, Kojou charged forward.

"You're not dying here on my watch. I'll make you reflect long and hard on where you went wrong—! C'mon over, Beast Vassal Number Two, Cor-Tauri Succinum!"

The demonic energy erupting from his entire body made a new Beast Vassal take physical form.

This was an enormous minotaur with a molten body. Lava spewing from the earth seemingly without limit constituted the Beast Vassal body proper. Giving off an amber glow from its entire frame, it towered over ten meters tall and gripped a thick battle-ax that was taller still.

The tortoise deployed its aura of emptiness to defend against that incandescent weapon. The encroachment of Nod blotted out space itself.

No matter how great the mass or how high the heat of the minotaur's body, the fact that it was wrought from demonic energy meant it could not breach the Nod bulwark.

However, Kojou and the others knew that already. They knew that the encroachment of Nod could nullify the laws of sorcery reliant upon Cain the Sinful God. And so, too, did they know it was powerless against simple physical attacks.

An incandescent glow spread across the ground at the *genbu's* feet.

Vampires were demons closely associated with the earth—to the point of superstitions passing around that they slept in coffins sprinkled with cursed earth of the grave from which they had crawled out. And there was one more symbol associated with vampires—

Countless stakes of lava erupted from the ground below, breaching the

encroachment of Nod and piercing the *genbu*'s giant body—

“Stakes made of...lava...?!”

A human-shaped figure enveloped by blue particles of light rose to the surface of the tortoise's wrecked head.

It was the knightly plate, its breast impaled by the lance—the sorcerous device of Cain was discarding the destroyed information, attempting to escape with the true body alone. Of course, Azama's flesh-and-blood body had to still be inside.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!”

Using the shattered *genbu* carapace as a stepping stone, Yukina leaped over the searing lava. With ritual energy coursing into it, the silver spear let off the dazzling glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect. Now that the sorcerous device was exposed, the blade of Snowdrift Wolf could reach it.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

The sorcerous device deployed the encroachment of Nod to protect itself. However, Yukina's silver spear rent the barrier as if it were mist, penetrating the gunmetal device.

“The armor of Cain... You've...!”

Robbed of its magical energy, the relic of The Cleansing simply broke apart, exposing Azama's bloody figure.

Seemingly switching places with Yukina, Kojou stood before him.

“—It's over, old man!”

Azama's face twisted with surprise and hatred as Kojou bashed it with his fist.

Azama's body danced in the sky; then, it slammed into the ground, and didn't move again.

Seeing this, Kojou took a deep breath.

He felt no sense of accomplishment. He didn't feel like he'd finished anything. That was natural; from the beginning to the end, Kojou and Yukina had been in

places far removed from the center of the incident. *We just had to stop Azama*, he believed, and that was something, at least. He still didn't know if it was the right choice.



But when Kojou and Yukina turned around, their eyes were greeted by the sight of relief coming over Yui's face—and Glenda doting on her with an innocent smile.

Guess it's fine, then..., he thought.

From the pocket of his school uniform, someone laughed with delight. "*Heh-heh.*"



OUTRO

In spite of being the middle of the New Year's holiday break, the passenger terminal at Haneda Airport was packed. Apparently, a mysterious windstorm occurring in the airspace above Tangiwa had thrown flight schedules into chaos.

As tourists and homecomers hurriedly went to and fro through the departing gate, Sayaka Kirasaka was huddled in a corner, hugging a little stuffed animal. She had long, chestnut-colored hair tied in a ponytail and wore a school uniform.

The black keyboard case complimented her tall, slender physique.

She possessed refined beauty to the point that anyone would look at her, even if she was just standing quietly, but at the moment, everyone was walking past her as quick as their steps could take them, apparently trying to avoid her. This was because Sayaka's beautiful eyebrows were ruffled as she desperately spoke to a stuffed animal.

Bewildered, Sayaka stared into the eyes of the stuffed animal in her hand as she exclaimed, "I-it's over...?!"

At a glance, it appeared to be a stuffed cat; and while, in fact, it was made from one, it was now a catlike *shikigami*. Yukari Endou was the one controlling it—a sorceress of exceptional skill as well as Sayaka's mentor.

Responding to her call, Sayaka had traveled long-distance until finally reaching Haneda, but...

"What's the meaning of this, master?! Wasn't this a special order from the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency—?! What do you mean, the incident's all wrapped up, so never mind?! I'm finally out from house arrest and threw away my vacation to come here, you know?! And I came, you know?!!"

Sayaka shook the stuffed animal around as she lamented. The little bell stuck

on the cat's neck made a light ringing sound in the process.

However, the stuffed animal gave no response. The other party had relinquished control of the *shikigami*, arbitrarily ending the call.

“—Um, master? H-hey, master, come on, don't cop out on me!” Sayaka stomped on the floor. “That bitch!”

That was when someone patted one of Sayaka's slender shoulders from behind.

“Heya, better give the hysterics a rest. You're standing out way too much, y'know...”

“Geh, a—a man?!”

When Sayaka turned around, standing there was a male high school student with spiky, combed-back hair wearing headphones around his neck. Largely on instinct, Sayaka attempted to smash his face in with an elbow, but a light backward sway on his part made the attack hit nothing but air.

Sayaka was now livid, nearly drawing a ritual scroll from a pocket when she finally remembered that she'd seen his face somewhere.

“You're...Kojou Akatsuki's friend...”

“Motoki Yaze. I'd appreciate it if you at least remembered my name by now, Kirasaka.”

The chummy demeanor Yaze addressed her with made Sayaka *really* want to kill him.

Despite that, and with her face twitching, she spoke in as composed a voice as she could manage.

“...What's a resident of a Demon Sanctuary doing in a place like this? You don't look like a tourist to me.”

“Same as you, probably.” Yaze's shoulders sank as he spoke with a pained smile. “My tomboy childhood friend rushed off and left Itogami Island. I thought I'd go and see what's happening, but it looks like the party ended before I could catch up.”

“What the heck, are you some kind of stalker...? That’s gross...!”

“You’re not one to talk with the secret photos you’ve been taking...”

As Yaze spoke, he took out and showed Sayaka her very own cell phone, the one supplied to her by the Lion King Agency. She’d only just gotten it back after having it confiscated due to her house arrest.

On the lock screen was a picture of Yukina Himeragi heading into school with Kojou Akatsuki beside her, something of an afterthought.

“Wait a... Th-that’s my cell phone! Why do you...?!”

When did he pick my pockets? thought Sayaka in confusion as she put a hand to the instrument case on her back. The case was the sheath for a silver longsword, permitted aboard airplanes due to her Attack Mage license. Inside was Lustrous Scale, a prototype area-suppression weapon of the Lion King Agency.

“I-I’ll cut you down!”

“Wait, wait! Here! I’m giving it back, okay?!”

Mindful of the eyes of passing travelers, Yaze hastily thrust the cell phone forward.

Sayaka’s face went crimson as she took the cell phone from him and said, “I-just to make this clear, the picture here features Yukina, and the others shown in the background are chumps I have no interest in whatsoever! If anything, I think they sully the image—!”

“Sure, sure.”

Yaze tossed aside the casual comment, nodding with an irritating, know-it-all look.

Sayaka glared at him with teary eyes and insisted, “If you’re done, get going already to Itogami Island—or to hell, if you prefer!”

“I’d just love to, but I found something that tugged at my mind a little—and if you kick up a big fuss here, those folks will get their guard up and that’d suck for me, so please, calm down a bit, won’t ya?” He squinted as he spoke. “Seriously, I’m begging you.”

Apparently, the entire reason for Yaze speaking to Sayaka was to prevent her from unwittingly standing out too much.

Meaning, the people who he didn't want to see a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Organization were close by...

"By 'folks'...you mean them?"

Sayaka followed Yaze's gaze to an airplane parked at the entrance to the airport's loading apron. It was a small jet-engine passenger plane with specs like a cargo plane's.

Individuals looking like engineers were gathered around the plane, seemingly inspecting the cargoes being swapped. "Ohh," went Sayaka, blinking her eyes when she saw a familiar face among the inspectors.

"Kojou Akatsuki's mother...?"

"What, you know her?"

Yaze asked as if that was somewhat unexpected. Sayaka nodded without a word.

The woman dressed in a well-worn white gown with a sleepy face was Mimori Akatsuki. Sayaka had met her in a guest room of MAR Inc., an international sorcerous industrial conglomerate. Behind that fluttery, unreliable-looking baby face, Mimori was the chief researcher of MAR's medical branch.

"That plane's a cargo plane chartered by MAR," Yaze whispered, cupping his hand. "On paper, what's in the cargo hold came in from Hokkaido, but it comes from somewhere farther up north."

"North... Wait, do you mean the Moscow Empire? But it's a non-signatory to the Holy Ground Treaty..."

Sayaka's expression grew grave. The Moscow Empire, located in the northern reaches of the Eurasian continent, was a great nation with vast territory and abundant mineral resources, but it had next to no contact with Japan. As a non-signatory to the Holy Ground Treaty, the nation was under international trade sanctions.

"That's probably why they're opening the container up here. If they treat it as

humanitarian aid, you can receive patients with incurable diseases even from countries under trade sanctions, and inspections are lighter here at Haneda than they'd be in a Demon Sanctuary."

"...A patient with an incurable disease?"

Sayaka's eyes glazed over, feeling something ominous from the odd detail in Yaze's words.

"That sounds a lot like smuggling... Why is a corporation on MAR's level going that far to...?"

Sayaka's train of thought was derailed when, immediately before the cargo was brought aboard the aircraft, the container door opened, and she caught a glimpse of the contents for a single instant.

Packed inside the blue-glass container was something that looked like a coffin of ice.

Within it, a beautiful girl slept.

"A...girl...?"

Perplexed, Sayaka furrowed her eyebrows.

There was but a single, brief word engraved on the container to identify the girl within.

Oracle.



It was nearly sunset when a helicopter arranged by the Lion King Agency came to pick up Kojou and company.

As an apology for causing them so much trouble, they had made arrangements to return Kojou and Yukina to Itogami Island. Apparently, their absconding from the Demon Sanctuary and smuggling themselves onto the mainland was being swept under the rug as well. Of course, neither Kojou nor Yukina was going to complain.

If there was one problem he could name, it was that Nagisa would be taking the same helicopter as he was.

“Hey, listen, Kojou. Even though Shirona told Granny to check herself into a hospital over and over, she wouldn’t listen one bit. She was all... *Don’t treat me like I’m old* and stuff! And Gajou—the instant they told Gajou they were sending him to the hospital Mimori works at, he started thrashing around and saying *Don’t! She’ll kill me!* That’s because of that thing that happened when he came home drunk that one time, which, like, never happens, right?”

The little sister whose face he hadn’t seen for some ten-odd days continued her monologue toward Kojou and Yukina with incredible vigor, seemingly to vent all of her frustrations. The pair could only listen dumbfounded as Nagisa kept talking for nearly two hours before tiring herself out and falling asleep.

Though exhausted from the battle with Azama, Kojou felt like he ought to be grateful just knowing that Nagisa was all right. Incidentally, Nagisa apparently had no memory from the moment she’d collapsed in the bath at the temple, and no one had told her of the appearance of demon beasts.

Kojou had passed off his reason for being at the temple as being concerned by her long absence and being unable to wait any longer. Though only so-so as an explanation, it paled compared to the wild tale Gajou had her buy into—that he’d sexually harassed the priestesses at the temple and Hisano had stabbed him for his trouble.

“Are you coming back with us, too?”

With Nagisa’s slumber leaving Kojou’s hands free, he pointed at the idling transport helicopter as he posed the question to Asagi. Apparently, on-site inspection related to the incident meant there was still a little time before the helicopter was set to depart.

“I’ll head back after I shop in the capital for two or three days. I went through all the procedures to leave the island, so it’ll be a problem if I don’t head back on a proper airplane.”

Asagi had already begun rapidly sifting through brand stores on her cell phone. Now that she was finally on the mainland, it seemed she intended to buy up some clothes, handbags, and cosmetics for her trouble.

“And what will you do, Tanker? That tank of yours is in pretty sorry shape...”

“I wait in anticipation of a recovery craft from Didier Heavy Industries. All the data gathered from this incident was well worth the effort.”

The redheaded girl straddling the legged tank replied to Asagi with a face overflowing with a sense of accomplishment.

“Well, if you’re happy with it, then that’s fine with me... Iblis? Er, where is Iblis...?”

Speaking those words, Asagi surveyed the area with a suspicious look. At some point, all sign of the foreign boy with them had vanished. In the end, he and Kojou hadn’t had any proper introduction. *But that’s just fine, really,* thought Kojou.

“Incidentally...,” he said, “...why are you wearing a swimsuit in a stupidly cold place like this?”

“Huh?!”

Kojou drawing attention to it made Asagi’s face redden in embarrassment as she finally remembered. She was wearing a pilot suit resembling a competition swimsuit that highly accentuated her curves; it even courteously provided a name space stretching right over her breasts.

“Th-there are various circumstances involved in... Wait, how long are you going to stare?!”

“Hey, you’re the lewd one here! You’re completely fine looking like that in public!

“Uwaa——!”

Asagi let out a shriek and unleashed a short uppercut right at Kojou’s face. Launched out of the blue, the attack knocked him directly on his back. During that time, Asagi fled into the robot tank.

What the hell was that for? Thought Kojou as he wiped away his nosebleed and sat up.

As Kojou did so, a pretty, folded handkerchief was held out right before his eyes. When Kojou looked up in surprise, he saw Yukina standing there, smiling at him.

It was a strangely repressed, artificial smile.

“Speaking of indecent, senpai— You drank Miss Glenda’s blood, didn’t you?”

Yukina began roughly wiping Kojou’s bloodstained lips.

Instantly judging that clumsy attempts to gloss things over would backfire, Kojou desperately composed himself and said, “W-well, yeah. Couldn’t be helped ’cause we had to get out of that weird in-between Nod place. Besides, Himeragi, Glenda had changed into you at the time...”

“Changed into me...? You mean, she shape-shifted?” Perplexed, Yukina inclined her head a little and crouched down beside Kojou.

Kojou nodded. “Well, somethin’ like that. I think she read the memories of the blood in me to re-create what you look like...”

“Memories of the blood... I see...” Yukina pressed a finger to her lips as she made a little nod.

Then, as if just remembering something rather important, Yukina’s big eyes narrowed as she said, “But Glenda was naked at the time, wasn’t she...?”

“Ah, er, yeah, because she’d changed into a dragon. I mean, she’s a dragon, so being naked is no big deal for—”

Kojou desperately pressed the point. When she’d first appeared, she was very much in dragon form, so it was by no means a total lie.

However, Yukina gazed at the shaken Kojou’s face with frigid eyes as she said, “So Miss Glenda changed into me, meaning..... Senpai, did you see...?”

“What?”

For an instant, Kojou’s gaze wavered, not understanding just what Yukina was saying to him. With him like that, Yukina pulled very close to his face.

“Did you see me...naked?”

“Ahh... Th-that’s... How should I put this...?”

More precisely, he hadn’t just seen, he’d touched, too, but of course he couldn’t tell her *that*.

During the time Kojou did not answer, Yukina’s rage turned into an icy frost of

bloodlust.

“Did you see anything?”

“Er, but it was Glenda on the inside...”

“Did you see anything?”

“.....”

“Senpai?”

With Yukina glaring at him with that cold, bladelike gaze, Kojou was frozen stiff as he continued to sweat profusely.

“Gimme a break,” he unwittingly murmured under his breath. The murmur melted into the night sky and vanished.



“—Yui!”

As she got out of the transport helicopter, Shio Hikawa raised a cheerful voice as she caught sight of her good friend.

It was in the Tangiwa Mountains far removed from civilization. Thanks to the ferocious clash between the Cleansers’ Major Azama and the Fourth Primogenitor, traces of a giant explosion had been carved into the foothill; it resembled the vestige of a volcanic eruption.

Yui Haba was standing in front of a cabin left intact near ground zero of that explosion.

“Shio! I’m so glad you’re all right!”

“Yeah, same here!”

Reunited, the two joined hands with happy, smiling faces. Both had their clothes all torn up, but somehow, they had managed to make it through alive. Considering that they’d been surrounded by monsters like the prince from the Fallen Dynasty and the Fourth Primogenitor, their good fortune was truly miraculous. No one could blame them for rejoicing like ordinary schoolgirls, forgetting that they were Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency for that one moment.

“Yui!”

Watching the pair so worked up must have made the steel-haired girl want to copy them, for she rushed over and embraced them, too. Strangely, though they were a little surprised, they didn’t find it uncomfortable at all. Perhaps that was due to her expression being the innocent smile of a baby’s.

“Hey, Glenda! Shoes! Put those shoes on!”

Yui was fussing over the steel-haired girl as if she were her guardian.

The girl named Glenda dutifully sat down and commenced hand-to-hand combat with her shoelaces. Yui aided the girl with an unpracticed hand. The scene was heartwarming, somehow.

“That girl’s a dragon?”

“Yeah. Probably.”

“That so. Nice to meet you, Glenda. I’m Shio Hikawa.”

When Shio squatted next to the girl and spoke, the steel-haired girl’s face turned amiable. “Shio,” she repeated, practically singing the word.

Yui watched the interaction between the pair with a smile. However, Shio realized immediately after that Yui was periodically glancing behind her back.

At the end of Yui’s gaze were two children wearing uniforms of the same color. One was a small-statured girl with a silver spear; the other was a boy with a languid expression.

“Hey, Yui. Isn’t that...Yukina Himeragi?”

Shio posed the question to Yui with a nonchalant tone.

“Y-yeah.”

Yui gulped; her shoulders trembled as she nodded. “Hmmm,” Shio murmured, scrutinizing the pair that was the object of Yui’s attention.

Yukina Himeragi had her face very close to the boy’s; they seemed to be having some kind of argument. The atmosphere was plainly stormy, but despite that, the ambiance between the two seemed very relaxed. She felt very much like she was watching a bickering couple bothering those around them.

“That girl’s gotten...cute somehow? Well, ah, she had a pretty face to begin with, but...”

As Shio watched Yukina’s angry expression, she mumbled those words without realizing it. She didn’t even understand why she had thought that.

However, Yukina agreed with a serious look, perhaps feeling the same.

“Yeah... You might be right.”

“Then...that’s Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor...”

“...Yeah. He looks better than I expected. I’m actually kind of jealous...”

This time, when Yui murmured, seemingly to herself, her quiet words genuinely took Shio by surprise.

“Hmm, well, he does look like he’ll turn into a nice man in another twenty years or so.”

From a distance, she stared at the side of Kojou Akatsuki’s face as she subconsciously said exactly what was on her mind.

Then it was Yui’s turn to be surprised.

“Eh? Shio, don’t tell me you...”

Yui’s eyes opened wide in surprise, her voice trembling.

That was when Shio finally realized her verbal slip. After all, both had a very good idea of what a Kojou Akatsuki with twenty more years on him would look like...

Wait, no, Shio thought, shaking her head. Shio absolutely *did not* think kindly about that wicked, middle-aged lecher. There was no way she’d even *dream* of it.

“Eh? Ah... N-no, you’re wrong. Just forget what I said. It’s really not like that...! It’s not!” exclaimed Shio, her voice echoing across the dusky sky.

The same sky as Itogami Island—and the same, silver moon—silently looked down upon them.

Afterword

Since the previous volume, the publication pace has gone up ever so slightly (smug face).

It's been a while. So *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 12 has finally arrived.

With the exception of one flashback story, *Strike the Blood* has been a tale taking place almost completely on Itogami Island; this time, the Japanese mainland became the stage. Furthermore, the season was winter. The lake was frozen, and there was even snow falling. Yes, it did occur to me that the rate of skin exposure was higher than normal for the girls (and one guy), but that's, you know, a luxury—like eating ice cream in a warm room in the middle of winter. Either way, the *Strike the Blood* world being chillier was fresh on a personal level.

Speaking of freshness, this volume had many new characters. In particular, I had a lot of fun writing Yuiri and Shio, a new pair closer to normal people than the Lion King Agency characters to date. Though the two do not realize it themselves (causing considerable trouble to those around them), Yukina and Sayaka really do possess talent head and shoulders above others of their generation, so I thought I should finally write about those circumstances. I believe the Yuiri and Shio combo will have opportunities to shine in the story to come, so by all means, please give them your best regards.

Now then, the stage for the next volume is expected to return to Itogami Island. It's about time for movers and shakers to gather together for big moves toward the story's climax, right? In particular, I think it'd be great to finally make the production schedule speed up a wee bit. I've been energetically thinking of a few new developments besides the ones in this volume, so if you're looking forward to them, great.

The comic version of *Strike the Blood* is still being serialized in *Monthly*

Dengeki Daioh. To TATE-sensei, in charge of the comic adaptation, thank you very much, as always. With each serialization, the combat scenes become more dynamic, and the characters get even more charming. I'm moved by every issue. I think faithful readers of the original work will definitely enjoy it, so by all means, get your hands on the comic version of *Strike the Blood*!

To Manyako, the illustrator, thank you very much once again. Amid a busy schedule, with me changing the clothes worn by the cast left and right with no thought as to the consequences, and under the terrible working condition known as "multiple new characters," I thank you profusely for putting the finishing touches on a charming work. This time, Yukina's legs—er, I mean, the front cover—was absolutely fantastic!

Also, allow me to thank from the bottom of my heart everyone involved in the creation and distribution of this book.

Of course, all of you who have read this book have my sincere thanks.

I hope very much to see you next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Table of Contents](#)
6. [Intro](#)
7. [Chapter One: On the Frozen Lake](#)
8. [Intermission i](#)
9. [Chapter Two: Battlefield of White Mist](#)
10. [Intermission ii](#)
11. [Chapter Three: The Knight of the Sinful God](#)
12. [Intermission iii](#)
13. [Chapter Four: The Primogenitor and the Dragon](#)
14. [Intermission iv](#)
15. [Chapter Five: Return from the Farthest Reaches](#)
16. [Outro](#)
17. [Afterword](#)
18. [Yen Newsletter](#)